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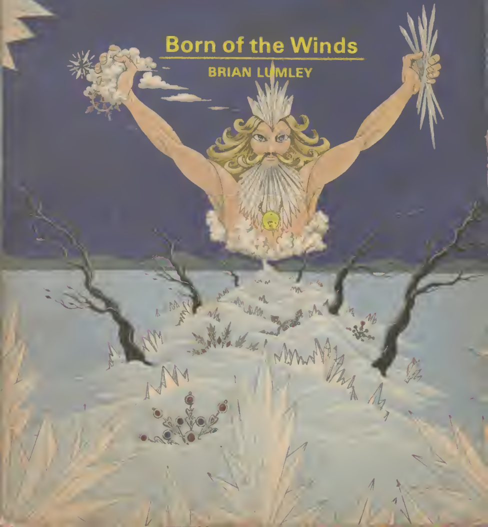

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NOVELETS

SHORT STORIES

DEPARTMENTS

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Prospecting for blast jewels on Venus, courtesy of John Varley's inventive mind. Mr. Varley's consistently superior storytelling has gained him a much deserved nomination for the John W. Campbell award for best new writer.

In The Bowl

by JOHN VARLEY

Never buy anything at a secondhand organbank. And while I'm handing out good advice, don't outfit yourself for a trip to Venus until you *get* to Venus.

I wish I had waited. But while shopping around at Coprates a few weeks before my vacation, I happened on this little shop and was talked into an infraeye at a very good price. What I should have asked myself was what was an infraeye doing on Mars in the first place?

Think about it. No one wears them on Mars. If you want to see at night, it's much cheaper to buy a snooperscope. That way you can take the damn thing off when the sun comes up. So this eye must have come back with a tourist from Venus. And there's no telling how long it sat there in the vat until this sweet-talking old guy gave me his line about how it belonged to a nice little old schoolteacher who never ...ah, well. You've probably heard it before.

If only the damn thing had gone on the blink before I left Venusburg. You know Venusburg: town of steamy swamps and sleazy hotels where you can get mugged as you walk down the public streets, lose a fortune at the gaming tables, buy any pleasure in the known universe, hunt the prehistoric monsters that wallow in the fetid marshes that are just a swamp-buggy ride out of town. You do? Then you should know that after hours — when they turn all the holos off and the place reverts to an ordinary cluster of silvery domes sitting in darkness and eight hundred degree temperature and pressure enough to give you a sinus headache just *thinking* about it, when they shut off all the tourist razzle-dazzle — it's no trouble to find your way to one of the rental agencies around the spaceport and

get medicanical work done. They'll accept Martian money. Your Solar Express Card is honored. Just walk right in, no waiting.

However...

I had caught the daily blimp out of Venusburg just hours after I touched down, happy as a clam, my infraeye working beautifully. By the time I landed in Cui-Cui Town, I was having my first inklings of trouble. Barely enough to notice; just the faintest hazing in the right-side peripheral vision. I shrugged it off. I had only three hours in Cui-Cui before the blimp left for Last Chance. I wanted to look around. I had no intention of wasting my few hours in a bodyshop getting my eye fixed. If it was still acting up at Last Chance, then I'd see about it.

Cui-Cui was more to my liking than Venusburg. There was not such a cast-of-thousands feeling there. On the streets of Venusburg the chances are about ten to one against meeting a real human being; everyone else is a holo put there to spice up the image and help the streets look not quite so *empty*. I quickly tired of zoot-suited pimps that I could see right through trying to sell me boys and girls of all ages. What's the *point?* Just try to touch one of those beautiful people.

In Cui-Cui the ratio was closer to fifty-fifty. And the theme was not decadent corruption, but struggling frontier. The streets were very convincing mud, and the wooden storefronts were tastefully done. I didn't care for the eight-legged dragons with eyestalks that constantly lumbered through the place, but I understand they are a memorial to the fellow who named the town. That's all right, but I doubt if he would have liked to have one of the damn things walk through him like a twelve-ton tank made of pixie dust.

I barely had time to get my feet "wet" in the "puddles" before the blimp was ready to go again. And the eye trouble had cleared up. So I was off to Last Chance.

I should have taken a cue from the name of the town. And I had every opportunity to do so. While there, I made my last purchase of supplies for the bush. I was going out where there were no air stations on every corner, and so I decided I could use a tagalong.

Maybe you've never seen one. They're modern science's answer to the backpack. Or maybe to the mule train, though in operation you're sure to be reminded of the safari bearers in old movies, trudging stolidly along behind the White Hunter with bales of supplies on their heads. The thing is a pair of metal legs exactly as long as your legs, with equipment on the top and an unbilical cord

attaching the contraption to your lower spine. What it does is provide you with the capability of living on the surface for four weeks instead of the five days you get from your Venus-lung.

The medico who sold me mine had me laying right there on his table with my back laid open so he could install the tubes that carry air from the tanks in the tagalong into my Venus-lung. It was a golden opportunity to ask him to check the eye. He probably would have, because while he was hooking me up he inspected and tested my lung and charged me nothing. He wanted to know where I bought it, and I told him Mars. He clucked, and said it seemed all right. He warned me not to ever let the level of oxygen in the lung get too low, to always charge it up before I left a pressure dome, even if I was only going out for a few minutes. I assured him that I knew all that and would be careful. So he connected the nerves into a metal socket in the small of my back and plugged the tagalong into it. He tested it several ways and said the job was done.

And I didn't ask him to look at the eye. I just wasn't thinking about the eye then. I'd not even gone out on the surfact yet. So I'd no real occasion to see it in action. Oh, things looked a little different, even in visible light. There were different colors and very few shadows, and the image I got out of the infraeye was fuzzier than the one from the other eye. I could close one eye, then the other, and see a real difference. But I wasn't thinking about it.

So I boarded the blimp the next day for the weekly scheduled flight to Lodestone, a company mining town close to the Fahrenheit Desert. Though how they were able to distinguish a desert from anything else on Venus was still a mystery to me. I was enraged to find that, though the blimp left half-loaded, I had to pay two fares: one for me, and one for my tagalong. I thought briefly of carrying the damn thing in my lap but gave it up after a ten-minute experiment in the depot. It was full of sharp edges and poking angles, and the trip was going to be a long one. So I paid. But the extra expense had knocked a large hole in my budget.

From Cui-Cui the steps got closer together and harder to reach. Cui-Cui is two thousand kilometers from Venusburg, and it's another thousand to Lodestone. After that the passenger service is spotty. I did find out how Venusians defined a desert, though. A desert is a place not yet inhabited by human beings. So long as I was still able to board a scheduled blimp, I wasn't there yet.

The blimps played out on me in

a little place called Prosperity. Population seventy-five humans and one otter. I thought the otter was a holo playing in the pool in the town square. The place didn't look prosperous enough to afford a real pool like that with real water. But it was. It was a transient town catering to prospectors. I understand that a town like that can vanish overnight if the prospectors move on. The owners of the shops just pack up and haul the whole thing away. The ratio of the things you see in a frontier town to what really is there is something like a hundred to one.

I learned with considerable relief that the only blimps I could catch out of Prosperity were headed in the direction I had come from. There was nothing at all going the other way. I was happy to hear that and felt it was only a matter of chartering a ride into the desert. Then my eye faded out entirely.

I remember feeling annoyed; no, more than annoyed. I was really angry. But I was still viewing it as a nuisance rather than a disaster. It was going to be a matter of some lost time and some wasted money.

I quickly learned otherwise. I asked the ticket seller (this was in a saloon-drugstore-arcade; there was no depot in Prosperity) where I could find someone who'd sell and install an infraeye. He laughed at me.

"Not out here you won't, brother," he said. "Never have had anything like that out here. Used to be a medico in Ellsworth, three stops back on the local blimp, but she moved back to Venusburg a year ago. Nearest thing now is in Last Chance."

I was stunned. I knew I was heading out for the deadlands, but it had never occurred to me that any place would be lacking in something so basic as a medico. Why, you might as well not sell food or air as not sell medicanical services. People might actually *die* out here. I wondered if the planetary government knew about this disgusting situation.

Whether they did or not, I realized that an incensed letter to them would do me no good. I was in a bind. Adding quickly in my head, I soon discovered that the cost of flying back to Last Chance and buying a new eye would leave me without enough money to return to Prosperity and still make it back to Venusburg. My entire vacation was about to be ruined just because I tried to cut some corners buying a used eye.

"What's the matter with the eye?" the man asked me.

"Huh? Oh, I don't know. I mean, it's just stopped working. I'm blind in it, that's what's wrong." I grasped at a straw, seeing the way he was studying my eye.

"Say, you don't know anything about it, do you?"

He shook his head and smiled ruefully at me. "Naw. Just a little here and there. I was thinking if it was the muscles that was giving you trouble, bad tracking or something like that —"

"No. No vision at all."

"Too bad. Sounds like a shot nerve to me. I wouldn't try to fool around with that. I'm just a tinkerer." He clucked his tongue sympathetically. "You want that ticket back to Last Chance?"

I didn't know what I wanted just then. I had planned this trip for two years. I almost bought the ticket, then thought what the hell. I was here, and I should at least look around before deciding what to do. Maybe there was someone here who could help me. I turned back to ask the clerk if he knew anyone, but he answered before I got it out.

"I don't want to raise your hopes too much," he said, rubbing his chin with a broad hand. "Like I say, it's not for sure, but —"

"Yes, what is it?"

"Well, there's a kid lives around here who's pretty crazy about medico stuff. Always tinkering around, doing odd jobs for people, fixing herself up; you know the type. The trouble is she's pretty loose in her ways. You might end up worse than when she's through with you than when you started."

"I don't see how," I said. "It's not working at all; what could she do to make it any worse?"

He shrugged. "It's your funeral. You can probably find her hanging around the square. If she's not there, check the bars. Her name's Ember. She's got a pet otter that's always with her. But you'll know her when you see her."

Finding Ember was no problem. I simply backtracked to the square and there she was, sitting on the stone rim of the fountain. She was trailing her toes in the water. Her otter was playing on a small waterslide, looking immensely pleased to have found the only open body of water within a thousand kilometers.

"Are you Ember?" I asked, sitting down beside her.

She looked up at me with that unsettling stare a Venusian can inflict on a foreigner. It comes of having one blue or brown eye and one that is all red, with no white. I looked that way myself, but I didn't have to look at it.

"What if I am?"

Her apparent age was about ten or eleven. Intuitively, I felt that it was probably very close to her actual age. Since she was supposed to be handy at medicanics, I could have been wrong. She had done some work on herself, but of course there was no way of telling how

extensive it might have been. Mostly it seemed to be cosmetic. She had no hair on her head. She had replaced it with a peacock fan of feathers that kept falling into her eyes. Her scalp skin had been transplanted to her lower legs and forearms, and the hair there was long, blonde, and flowing. From the contours of her face I was sure that her skull was a mass of file marks and bone putty from where she'd fixed the understructure to reflect the face she wished to wear.

"I was told that you know a little medicanics. You see, this eye has —"

She snorted. "I don't know who would have told you *that*. I know a hell of a lot about medicine. I'm not just a back-yard tinkerer. Come on, Malibu."

She started to get up, and the otter looked back and forth between us. I don't think he was ready to leave the pool.

"Wait a minute. I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings. Without knowing anything about you I'll admit that you must know more about it than anyone else in town."

She sat back down, finally had to grin at me.

"So you're in a spot, right? It's me or no one. Let me guess: you're here on vacation, that's obvious. And either time or money is preventing you from going back to Last Chance for professional work." She looked me up and down. "I'd say it was money."

"You hit it. Will you help me?"

"That depends." She moved closer and squinted into my infraeye. She put her hands on my cheeks to hold my head steady. There was nowhere for me to look but her face. There were no scars visible on her; at least she was that good. Her upper canines were about five millimeters longer than the rest of her teeth.

"Hold still. Where'd you get this?"

"Mars."

"Thought so. It's a Gloom Piercer, made by Northern Bio. Cheap model; they peddle 'em mostly to tourists. Maybe ten, twelve years old."

"Is it the nerve? The guy I talked to —"

"Nope. She leaned back and resumed splashing her feet in the water. "Retina. The right side is detached, and it's flopped down over the fovea. Probably wasn't put on very tight in the first place. They don't make those things to last more than a year."

I sighed and slapped my knees with my palms. I stood up, held out my hand to her.

"Well, I guess that's that. Thanks for your help."

She was surprised. "Where you going?"

"Back to Last Chance, then to Mars to sue a certain organbank. There are laws for this sort of thing on Mars."

"Here, too. But why go back? I'll fix it for you."

We were in her workshop, which doubled as her bedroom and kitchen. It was just a simple dome without a single holo. It was refreshing after the ranch-style houses that seemed to be the rage in Prosperity. I don't wish to sound chauvinistic, and I realize that Venusians need some sort of visual stimulation, living as they do in a cloud-covered desert. Still, the emphasis on illusion there was never to my liking. Ember lived next door to a man who lived in a perfect replica of the Palace at Versailles. She told me that when he shut his holo generators off the residue of his *real* possessions would have fit in a knapsack. Including the holo generator.

"What brings you to Venus?"

"Tourism."

She looked at me out of the corner of her eye as she swabbed my face with nerve deadener. I was stretched out on the floor, since there was no furniture in the room except a few work tables.

"All right. But we don't get many tourists this far out. If it's none of my business, just say so."

"It's none of your business."

She sat up. "Fine. Fix your own eye." She waited with a half smile on her face. I eventually had to smile, too. She went back to work, selecting a spoon-shaped tool from a haphazard pile at her knees.

"I'm an amateur geologist. Rock hound, actually. I work in an office, and weekends I get out in the country and hike around. The rocks are an excuse to get me out there, I guess."

She popped the eye out of its socket and reached in with one finger to deftly unhook the metal connection along the optic nerve. She held the eyeball up to the light and peered into the lens.

"You can get up now. Pour some of this stuff into the socket and squint down on it." I did as she asked and followed her to the workbench.

She sat on a stool and examined the eye more closely. Then she stuck a syringe into it and drained out the aqueous humor, leaving the orb looking like a turtle egg that's dried in the sun. She sliced it open and started probing carefully. The long hairs on her forearms kept getting in the way. So she paused and tied them back with rubber bands.

"Rock hound," she mused. "You must be here to get a look at the blast jewels."

"Right. Like I said, I'm strictly a small-time geologist. But I read

about them and saw one once in a jeweler's shop in Phobos. So I saved up and came to Venus to try and find one of my own."

"That should be no problem. Easiest gems to find in the known universe. Too bad. People out here were hoping they could get rich off them." She shrugged. "Not that there's not some money to be made off them. Just not the fortune everybody was hoping for. Funny; they're as rare as diamonds used to be, and to make it even better, they don't duplicate in the lab the way diamonds do. Oh, I guess they could make 'em, but it's way too much trouble." She was using a tiny device to staple the detached retina back onto the rear surface of the eye.

"Go on."

"Huh?"

"Why can't they make them in the lab?"

She laughed. "You *are* an amateur geologist. Like I said, they could, but it'd cost too much. They're a blend of a lot of different elements. A lot of aluminum, I think. That's what makes rubies red, right?"

"Yes."

"It's the other impurities that make them so pretty. And you have to make them in high pressure and heat, and they're so unstable that they usually blow before you've got the right mix. So it's cheaper to go out and pick 'em up."

"And the only place to pick them up is in the middle of the Fahrenheit Desert."

"Right." She seemed to be finished with her stapling. She straightened up to survey her work with a critical eye. She frowned, then sealed up the incision she had made and pumped the liquid back in. She mounted it in a caliper and aimed a laser at it, then shook her head when she read some figures on a readout by the laser.

"It's working," she said. "But you really got a lemon. The iris is out of true. It's an ellipse, about .24 eccentric. It's going to get worse. See that brown discoloration on the left side? That's progressive decay in the muscle tissue, poisons accumulating in it. And you're a dead cinch for cataracts in about four months."

I couldn't see what she was talking about, but I pursed my lips as if I did.

"But will it last that long?"

She smirked at me. "Are you looking for a six-month warranty? Sorry, I'm not a member of the VMA. But if it isn't legally binding, I guess I'd feel safe in saying it ought to last that long. Maybe."

"You sure go out on a limb, don't you?"

"It's good practice. We future medicos must always be on the alert for malpractice suits. Lean over

here and I'll put it in."

"What I was wondering," I said, as she hooked it up and eased it back into the socket, "is whether I'd be safe going out in the desert for four weeks with this eye."

"No," she said promptly, and I felt a great weight of disappointment. "Nor with any eye," she quickly added. "Not if you're going alone."

"I see. But you think the eye would hold up?"

"Oh, sure. But you wouldn't. That's why you're going to take me up on my astounding offer and let me be your guide through the desert."

I snorted. "You think so? Sorry, this is going to be a solo expedition. I planned it that way from the first. That's what I go out rock hunting for in the first place: to be alone." I dug my credit meter out of my pouch. "Now, how much do I owe you?"

She wasn't listening but was resting her chin on her palm and looking wistful.

"He goes out so he can be alone, did you hear that, Malibu?" The otter looked up at her from his place on the floor. "Now take me, for instance. Me, I know what being alone is all about. It's the crowds and big cities I crave. Right, old buddy?" The otter kept looking at her, obviously ready to agree to anything.

"I suppose so," I said. "Would a hundred be all right?" That was about half what a registered medico would have charged me, but like I said, I was running short.

"You're not going to let me be your guide? Final word?"

"No. Final. Listen, it's not you, it's just —"

"I know. You want to be alone. No charge. Come on, Malibu." She got up and headed for the door. Then she turned around.

"I'll be seeing you," she said, and winked at me.

It didn't take me too long to understand what the wink had been all about. I can see the obvious on the third or fourth go-around.

The fact was that Prosperity was considerably bemused to have a tourist in its midst. There wasn't a rental agency or hotel in the entire town. I had thought of that but hadn't figured it would be too hard to find someone willing to rent his private skycycle if the price was right. I'd been saving out a large chunk of cash for the purpose of meeting extortionate demands in that department. I felt sure the locals would be only too willing to soak a tourist.

But they weren't taking. Just about everyone had a skycycle, and absolutely everyone who had one was uninterested in renting it. They were a necessity to anyone who

worked out of town, which everyone did, and they were hard to get. Freight schedules were as spotty as the passenger service. And every person who turned me down had a helpful suggestion to make. As I say, after the fourth or fifth such suggestion I found myself back in the town square. She was sitting just as she had been the first time, trailing her feet in the water. Malibu never seemed to tire of the waterslide.

"Yes," she said, without looking up. "It so happens that I *do* have a skycycle for rent."

I was exasperated, but I had to cover it up. She had me over the proverbial barrel.

"Do you always hang around here?" I asked. "People tell me to see you about a skycycle and tell me to look here, almost like you and this fountain are a hyphenated word. What else do you do?"

She fixed me with a haughty glare. "I repair eyes for dumb tourists. I also do body work for everyone in town at only twice what it would cost them in Last Chance. And I do it damn well, too, though those rubes'd be the last to admit it. No doubt Mr. Lamara at the ticket station told you scandalous lies about my skills. They resent it because I'm taking advantage of the cost and time it would take them to get to Last Chance and pay merely inflated prices, instead of the outrageous ones I charge them."

I had to smile, though I was sure I was about to become the object of some outrageous prices myself. She was a shrewd operator.

"How old are you?" I found myself asking, than almost bit my tongue. The last thing a proud and independent child likes to discuss is age. But she surprised me.

"In mere chronological time, eleven Earth years. That's just over six of your years. In real, internal time, of course, I'm ageless."

"Of course. Now about that cycle...."

"Of course. But I evaded your earlier question. What I do besides sit here is irrelevant, because while sitting here I am engaged in contemplating eternity. I'm diving into my navel, hoping to learn the true depth of the womb. In short, I'm doing my yoga exercises." She looked thoughtfully out over the water to her pet. "Besides, it's the only pool in a thousand kilometers." She grinned at me and dived flat over the water. She cut it like a knife blade and torpedoed out to her otter, who set up a happy racket of barks.

When she surfaced near the middle of the pool, out by the jets and falls, I called to her.

"What about the cycle?"

She cupped her ear, though she was only about fifteen meters away.

"I said what about the cycle?"

"I can't hear you," she mouthed. "You'll have to come out here."

I stepped into the pool, grumbling to myself. I could see that her price included more than just money.

"I can't swim," I warned.

"Don't worry, it won't get much deeper than that." It was up to my chest. I sloshed out until I was on tiptoe, then grabbed at a jutting curlicue on the fountain. I hauled myself up and sat on the wet Venusian marble with water trickling down my legs.

Ember was sitting at the bottom of the waterslide, thrashing her feet in the water. She was leaning flat against the smooth rock. The water that sheeted over the rock made a bow wave at the crown of her head. Beads of water ran off her head feathers. Once again she made me smile. If charm could be sold, she could have been wealthy. What am I talking about? Nobody ever sells anything *but* charm, in one way or another. I got a grip on myself before she tried to sell me the north and south poles. In no time at all I was able to see her as an avaricious, cunning little guttersnipe again.

"One billion Solar Marks per hour, not a penny less," she said from that sweet little mouth.

There was no point in negotiating from an offer like that. "You brought me out here to hear *that?* I'm really disappointed in you. I didn't take you for a tease, I really didn't. I thought we could do business. I —"

"Well, if that offer isn't satisfactory, try this one. Free of charge, except for oxygen and food and water." She waited, threshing the water with her feet.

Of course there would be some teeth in that. In an intuitive leap of truly cosmic scale, a surmise worthy of an Einstein, I saw the string. She saw me make that leap, knew I didn't like where I had landed, and her teeth flashed at me. So once again, and not for the last time, I had to either strangle her or smile at her. I smiled. I don't know how, but she had this knack of making her opponents like her even as she screwed them.

"Are you a believer in love at first sight?" I asked her, hoping to throw her off guard. Not a chance.

"Maudlin wishful thinking, at best," she said. "You have *not* bowled me over, Mister —"

"Kiku."

"Nice. Martian name?"

"I suppose so. I never really thought of it. I'm not rich, Ember."

"Certainly not. You wouldn't have put yourself in my hands if you were."

"Then why are you so attracted to me? Why are you so determined to go with me, when all I want from

you is to rent your cycle? If I was that charming, I would have noticed it by now."

"Oh, I don't know," she said, with one eyebrow climbing up her forehead. "There's *something* about you that I find absolutely fascinating. Irresistible, even." She pretended to swoon.

"Want to tell me what it is?"

She shook her head. "Let that be my little secret for now."

I was beginning to suspect she was attracted to me by the shape of my neck — so she could sink her teeth into it and drain my blood. I decided to let it lie. Hopefully she'd tell me more in the days ahead. Because it looked like there would be days together, many of them.

"When can you be ready to leave?"

"I packed right after I fixed your eye. Let's get going."

Venus is spooky. I thought and thought, and that's the best way I can describe it.

It's spooky partly because of the way you see it. Your right eye — the one that sees what's called visible light — shows you only a small circle of light that's illuminated by your hand torch. Occasionally there's a glowing spot of molten metal in the distance, but it's far too dim to see by. Your infraeye pierces those shadows and gives you a blurry picture of what lies outside the torchlight, but I would have almost rather been blind.

There's no good way to describe how this dichotomy affects your mind. One eye tells you that everything beyond a certain point is shadowy, while the other shows you what's in those shadows. Ember says that after a while your brain can blend the two pictures as easily as it does for binocular vision. I never reached that point. The whole time I was there I was trying to reconcile the two pictures.

I don't like standing in the bottom of a bowl a thousand kilometers wide. That's what you see. No matter how high you climb or how far you go, you're still standing in the bottom of that bowl. It has something to do with the bending of the light rays by the thick atmosphere, if I understand Ember correctly.

Then there's the sun. When I was there it was night time, which means that the sun was a squashed ellipse hanging just above the horizon is the east, where it had set weeks and weeks ago. Don't ask me to explain it. All I know is that the sun never sets on Venus. Never, no matter where you are. It just gets flatter and flatter and wider and wider until it oozes around to the north or south, depending on where you are, becoming a flat, bright line of light until it begins pulling itself back together in the

west, where it's going to rise in a few weeks.

Ember says that at the equator it becomes a complete circle for a split second when it's actually directly underfoot. Like the lights of a terrific stadium. All this happens up at the rim of the bowl you're standing in, about ten degrees above the theoretical horizon. It's another refraction effect.

You don't see it in your left eye. Like I said, the clouds keep out virtually all of the visible light. It's in your right eye. The color is what I got to think of as infrablue.

It's quiet. You begin to miss the sound of your own breathing, and if you think about that too much, you begin to wonder why you *aren't* breathing. You know, of course, except the hindbrain, which never likes it at all. It doesn't matter to the autonomic nervous system that your Venus-lung is dribbling oxygen directly into your bloodstream; those circuits aren't made to understand things; they are primitive and very wary of improvements. So I was plagued by a feeling of suffocation, which was my medulla getting even with me, I guess.

I was also pretty nervous about the temperature and pressure. Silly, I know. Mars would kill me just as dead without a suit, and do it more slowly and painfully into the bargain. If my suit failed here, I doubt if I'd have felt anything. It was just the thought of that incredible pressure being held one millimeter away from my fragile skin by a force field that, physically speaking, isn't even there. Or so Ember told me. She might have been trying to get my goat. I mean, lines of magnetic force have no physical reality, but they're *there*, aren't they?

I kept my mind off it. Ember was there and she knew about such things.

What she couldn't adequately explain to me was why a skycycle didn't have a motor. I thought about that a lot, sitting on the saddle and pedaling my ass off with nothing to look at but Ember's silver-plated buttocks.

She had a tandem cycle, which meant four seats; two for us and two for our tagalongs. I sat behind Ember, and the tagalongs sat in two seats off to our right. Since they aped our leg movements with exactly the same force we applied, what we had was a four-human-power cycle.

"I can't figure out for the life of me," I said on our first day out, "what would have been so hard about mounting an engine on this thing and using some of the surplus power from our packs."

"Nothing hard about it, lazy," she said, without turning around.

"Take my advice as a fledgling medico; this is much better for you. If you *use* the muscles you're wearing, they'll last you a lot longer. It makes you feel healthier and keeps you out of the clutches of money-grubbing medicos. I *know*. Half my work is excising fat from flabby behinds and digging varicose veins out of legs. Even out here, people don't get more than twenty years' use of their legs before they're ready for a trade-in. That's pure waste."

"I think I should have had a trade-in before we left. I'm about done in. Can't we call it a day?"

She tut-tutted, but touched a control and began spilling hot gas from the balloon over our heads. The steering vanes sticking out at our sides tilted, and we started a slow spiral to the ground.

We landed at the bottom of the bowl — my first experience with it, since all my other views of Venus had been from the air where it isn't so noticeable. I stood looking at it and scratching my head while Ember turned on the tent and turned off the balloon.

The Venusians use null fields for just about everything. Rather than try to cope with a technology that must stand up to the temperature and pressure extremes, they coat everything in a null field and let it go at that. The balloon on the cycle was nothing but a standard globular field with a discontinuity at the bottom for the air heater. The cycle body was protected with the same kind of field that Ember and I wore, the kind that follows the surface at a set distance. The tent was a hemispherical field with a flat floor.

It simplified a lot of things. Airlocks, for instance. What we did was to simply walk into the tent. Our suit fields vanished as they were absorbed into the tent field. To leave one need merely walk through the wall again, and the suit would form around you.

I plopped myself down on the floor and tried to turn my hand torch off. To my surprise, I found that it wasn't built to turn off. Ember turned on the campfire and noticed my puzzlement.

"Yes, it is wasteful," she conceded. "There's something in a Venusian that hates to turn out a light. You won't find a light switch on the entire planet. You may not believe this, but I was shocked silly a few years ago when I heard about light switches. The idea had never occurred to me. See what a provincial I am?"

That didn't sound like her. I searched her face for clues to what had brought on such a statement, but I could find nothing. She was sitting in front of the campfire with Malibu on her lap, preening her feathers.

I gestured at the fire, which was a beautifully executed holo of snapping, crackling logs with a heater concealed in the center of it.

"Isn't that an uncharacteristic touch? Why didn't you bring a fancy house, like the ones in town?"

"I like the fire. I don't like phony houses."

"Why not?"

She shrugged. She was thinking of other things. I tried another tack.

"Does your mother mind you going into the desert with strangers?"

She shot me a look I couldn't read.

"How should I know? I don't live with her. I'm emancipated. I think she's in Venusburg." I had obviously touched a tender area, so I went cautiously.

"Personality conflicts?"

She shrugged again, not wanting to get into it.

"No. Well, yes, in a way. She wouldn't emigrate from Venus. I wanted to leave and she wanted to stay. Our interests didn't coincide. So we went our own ways. I'm working my way toward passage off-planet."

"How close are you?"

"Closer than you might think." She seemed to be weighing something in her mind, sizing me up. I could hear the gears grind and the cash register bells cling as she studied my face. Then I felt the charm start up again, like the flicking of one of those nonexistent light switches.

"See, I'm as close as I've ever been to getting off Venus. In a few weeks, I'll be there. As soon as we get back with some blast jewels. Because you're going to adopt me."

I think I was getting used to her. I wasn't rocked by that, though it was nothing like what I had expected to hear. I had been thinking vaguely along the lines of blast jewels. She picks some up along with me, sells them, and buys a ticket off-planet, right?

That was silly, of course. She didn't need *me* to get blast jewels. She was the guide, not I, and it was her cycle. She could get as many jewels as she wanted, and probably already had. This scheme had to have something to do with me, personally, as I had known back in town and forgotten about. There was something she wanted from me.

"That's why you had to go with me? That's the fatal attraction? I don't understand."

"Your passport. I'm in love with your passport. On the blank labeled 'citizenship' it says 'Mars.' Under age it says, oh...about seventy-three." She was within a year, though I keep my appearance at about thirty.

"So?"

"So, my dear Kiku, you are visiting a planet which is groping its way into the stone age. A medieval planet, Mr. Kiku, that sets the age of majority at thirteen — a capricious and arbitrary figure, as I'm sure you'll agree. The laws of this planet state that certain rights of free citizens are withheld from minor citizens. Among these are liberty, the pursuit of happiness, and the ability *to get out of the goddam place!*" She startled me with her fury, coming so hard on the heels of her usual amusing glibness. Her fists were clenched. Malibu, sitting in her lap, looked sadly up at his friend, then over to me.

She quickly brightened and bounced up to prepare dinner. She would not respond to my questions. The subject was closed for the day.

I was ready to turn back the next day. Have you ever had stiff legs? Probably not; if you go in for that sort of thing — heavy physical labor — you are probably one of those health nuts and keep yourself in shape. I wasn't in shape, and I thought I'd die. For a panicky moment I thought I *was* dying.

Luckily, Ember had anticipated it. She knew I was a desk jockey, and she knew how pitifully under conditioned Martians tend to be. Added to the sedentary life styles of most modern people, we Martians come off even worse than the majority because Mars' gravity never gives us much of a challenge no matter how hard we try. My leg muscles were like soft noodles.

She gave me an old-fashioned massage and a new-fangled injection that killed off the accumulated poisons. In an hour I began to take a flickering interest in the trip. So she loaded me onto the cycle and we started off on another leg of the journey.

There's no way to measure the passage of time. The sun gets flatter and wider, but it's much too slow to see. Sometime that day we passed a tributary of the Reynoldswrap River. It showed up as a bright line in my right eye, as a crusted, sluggish semiglacier in my left. Molten aluminum, I was told. Malibu knew what it was, and barked plaintively for us to stop so he could go for a slide. Ember wouldn't let him.

You can't get lost on Venus, not if you can still see. The river had been visible since we left Prosperity, though I hadn't known what it was. We could still see the town behind us and the mountain range in front of us and even the desert. It was a little ways up the slope of the bowl. Ember said that meant it was still about three days journey away from us. It takes practice to judge distance. Ember kept trying to

point out Venusburg, which was several thousand kilometers behind us. She said it was easily visible as a tiny point on a clear day. I never spotted it.

We talked a lot as we pedaled. There was nothing else to do and, besides, she was fun to talk to. She told me more of her plan for getting off Venus and filled my head with her naive ideas of what other planets were like.

It was a subtle selling campaign. We started off with her being the advocate for her crazy plan. At some point it evolved into an assumption. She took it as settled that I would adopt her and take her to Mars with me. I half believed it myself.

On the fourth day I began to notice that the bowl was getting higher in front of us. I didn't know what was causing it until Ember called a halt and we hung there in the air. We were facing a solid line of rock that sloped gradually upward to a point about fifty meters higher than we were.

"What's the matter?" I asked, glad of the rest.

"The mountains are higher," she said matter-of-factly. "Let's turn to the right and see if we can find a pass."

"Higher? What are you talking about?"

"Higher. You know, taller, sticking up more than they did the last time I was around, of slightly greater magnitude in elevation, bigger than —"

"I know the definition of higher," I said. "But why? Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. The air heater for the balloon is going flat-out; we're as high as we can go. The last time I came through here, it was plenty to get me across. But not today."

"Why?"

"Condensation. The topography can vary quite a bit here. Certain metals and rocks are molten on Venus. They boil off on a hot day, and they can condense on the mountain tops where it's cooler. Then they melt when it warms up and flow back to the valleys."

"You mean you brought me here in the middle of winter?"

She threw me a withering glance.

"You're the one who booked passage for winter. Besides, it's night, and it's not even midnight yet. I hadn't thought the mountains would be this high for another week."

"Can't we get around?"

She surveyed the slope critically.

"There's a permanent pass about five hundred kilometers to the east. But that would take us another week. Do you want to?"

"What's the alternative?"

"Parking the cycle here and going on foot. The desert is just over this range. With any luck we'll see our first jewels today."

I was realizing that I knew far too little about Venus to make a good decision. I had finally admitted to myself that I was lucky to have Ember along to keep me out of trouble.

"We'll do what you think best."

"All right. Turn hard left and we'll park."

We tethered the cycle by a long tungsten-alloy rope. The reason for that, I learned, was to prevent it from being buried in case there was more condensation while we were gone. It floated at the end of the cable with its heaters going full blast. And we started up the mountain.

Fifty meters doesn't sound like much. And it's not, on level ground. Try it sometime on a seventy-five degree slope. Luckily for us, Ember had seen this possibility and come prepared with alpine equipment. She sank pitons here and there and kept us together with ropes and pulleys. I followed her lead, staying slightly behind her tagalong. It was uncanny how that thing followed her up, placing its feet in precisely the spots she had stepped. Behind me, my tagalong was doing the same thing. Then there was Malubu, almost running along, racing back to see how we were doing, going to the top and chattering about what was on the other side.

I don't suppose it would have been much for a mountain climber. Personally I'd have preferred to slide on down the mountainside and call it quits. I would have, but Ember just kept going up. I don't think I've ever been so tired as the moment when we reached the top and stood looking over the desert.

Ember pointed ahead of us.

"There's one of the jewels going off now," she said.

"Where?" I asked, barely interested. I could see nothing.

"You missed it. It's down lower. They don't form up this high. Don't worry, you'll see more by and by."

And down we went. This wasn't too hard. Ember set the example by sitting down in a smooth place and letting go. Malibu was close behind her, squealing happily as he bounced and rolled down the slippery rock face. I saw Ember hit a bump and go flying in the air to come down on her head. Her suit was already stiffened. She continued to bounce her way down, frozen in a sitting position.

I followed them down in the same way. I didn't much care for the idea of bouncing around like that, but I cared even less for a slow, painful descent. It wasn't too bad. You don't feel much after your

suit freezes in impact mode. It expands slightly away from your skin and becomes harder than metal, cushioning you from anything but the most severe blows that could bounce your brain against your skull and give you internal injuries. We never got going nearly fast enough for that.

Ember helped me up at the bottom after my suit unfroze. She looked like she had enjoyed the ride. I hadn't. One bounce seemed to have impacted my back slightly. I didn't tell her about it but just started off after her, feeling a pain with each step.

"Where on Mars do you live?" she asked brightly.

"Uh? Oh, at Coprates. That's on the northern slope of the Canyon."

"Yes, I know. Tell me more about it. Where will we live? Do you have a surface apartment, or are you stuck down in the underground? I can hardly wait to see the place."

She was getting on my nerves. Maybe it was just the lower-back pain.

"What makes you think you're going with me?"

"But of course you're taking me back. You said, just —"

"I said nothing of the sort. If I had a recorder I could prove it to you. No, our conversations over the last days have been a series of monologues. You tell me what fun you're going to have when we get to Mars, and I just grunt something. That's because I haven't the heart, or haven't *had* the heart, to tell you what a hare-brained scheme you're talking about."

I think I had finally managed to drive a barb into her. At any rate, she didn't say anything for a while. She was realizing that she had overextended herself and was counting the spoils before the battle was won.

"What's hare-brained about it?" she said at last.

"Just everything."

"No, come on, tell me."

"What makes you think I want a daughter?"

She seemed relieved. "Oh, don't worry about that. I won't be any trouble. As soon as we land, you can file dissolution papers. I won't contest it. In fact, I can sign a binding agreement not to contest anything before you even adopt me. This is strictly a business arrangement, Kiku. You don't have to worry about being a mother to me. I don't need one. I'll —"

"What makes you think it's just a business arrangement to *me*?" I exploded. "Maybe I'm old-fashioned. Maybe I've got funny ideas. But I won't enter into an adoption of convenience. I've already had my one child, and I was a good parent. I won't adopt you just to get you to

Mars. That's my final word."

She was studying my face. I think she decided I meant it.

"I can offer you twenty thousand Marks."

I swallowed hard.

"Where did you get that kind of money?"

"I told you I've been soaking the good people of Prosperity. What the hell is there for me to spend it on out here? I've been putting it away for an emergency like this. Up against an unfeeling Neanderthal with funny ideas about right and wrong, who —"

"That's enough of that." I'm ashamed to say that I was tempted. It's unpleasant to find that what you had thought of as moral scruples suddenly seem not quite so important in the face of a stack of money. But I was helped along by my backache and the nasty mood it had given me.

"You think you can buy me. Well, I'm not for sale. I told you, I think it's wrong."

"Well *damn* you, Kiku, damn you to hell." She stomped her foot hard on the ground, and her tagalong redoubled the gesture. She was going to go on damning me, but we were blasted by an explosion as her foot hit the ground.

It had been quiet before, as I said. There's no wind, no animals, hardly anything to make a sound on Venus. But when a sound gets going, watch out. That thick atmosphere is murder. I thought my head was going to come off. The sound waves battered against our suits, partially stiffening them. The only thing that saved us from deafness was the millimeter of low-pressure air between the suit field and our eardrums. It cushioned the shock enough that we were left with just a ringing in our ears.

"What was that?" I asked.

Ember sat down on the ground. She hung her head, uninterested in anything but her own disappointment.

"Blast jewel," she said. "Over that way." She pointed, and I could see a dull glowing spot about a kilometer off. There were dozens of smaller points of light — infralight — scattered around the spot.

"You mean you set if off just by stomping the ground?"

She shrugged. "They're unstable. They're full of nitroglycerine, as near as anyone can figure."

"Well, let's go pick up the pieces."

"Go ahead." She was going limp on me. And she stayed that way, no matter how I cajoled her. By the time I finally got her on her feet, the glowing spots were gone, cooled off. We'd never find them now. She wouldn't talk to me as we

continued down into the valley. All the rest of the day we were accompanied by distant gunshots.

We didn't talk much the next day. She tried several times to reopen the negotiations, but I made it clear that my mind was made up. I pointed out to her that I had rented her cycle and services according to the terms she had set. Absolutely free, she had said, except for consumables, which I had paid for. There had been no mention of adoption. If there had, I assured her, I would have turned her down just as I was doing now. Maybe I even believed it.

That was during the short time the morning after our argument when it seemed like she was having no more to do with the trip. She just sat there in the tent while I made breakfast. When it came time to go, she pouted and said she wasn't going looking for blast jewels, that she'd just as soon stay right there or turn around.

After I pointed out our verbal contract, she reluctantly got up. She didn't like it, but honored her word.

Hunting blast jewels proved to be a big anticlimax. I'd had visions of scouring the countryside for days. Then the exciting moment of finding one. Eureka! I'd have howled. The reality was nothing like that. Here's how you hunt blast jewels: you stomp down hard on the ground, wait a few seconds, then move on and stomp again. When you see and hear an explosion, you simply walk to where it occurred and pick them up. They're scattered all over, lit up in the infrared bands from the heat of the explosion. They might as well have had neon arrows flashing over them. Big adventure.

When we found one, we'd pick it up and pop it into a cooler mounted on our tagalongs. They are formed by the pressure of the explosion, but certain parts of them are volatile at Venus temperatures. These elements will boil out and leave you with a grayish powder in about three hours if you don't cool them down. I don't know why they lasted as long as they did. They were considerably hotter than the air when we picked them up. So I thought they should have melted right off.

Ember said it was the impaction of the crystalline lattice that gave the jewels the temporary strength to outlast the temperature. Things behave differently in the temperature and pressure extremes of Venus. As they cooled off, the lattice was weakened and a progressive decay set in. That's why it was important to get them as soon as possible after the explosion to get unflawed gems.

We spent the whole day at that.

Eventually we collected about ten kilos of gems, ranging from pea size up to a few the size of an apple.

I sat beside the campfire and examined them that night. Night by my watch, anyway. Another thing I was beginning to miss was the twenty-five-hour cycle of night and day. And while I was at it, moons. It would have cheered me up considerably to spot Diemos or Phobos that night. But the sun just squatted up there in the horizon, moving slowly to the north in preparation for its transition to the morning sky.

The jewels were beautiful, I'll say that much for them. They were a wine-red color, tinged with brown. But when the light caught them right, there was no predicting what I might see. Most of the raw gems were coated with a dull substance that hid their full glory. I experimented with chipping some of them. What was left behind when I flaked off the patina was a slippery surface that sparkled even in candlelight. Ember showed me how to suspend them from a string and strike them. Then they would ring like tiny bells, and every once in a while one would shed all its imperfections and emerge as a perfect eight-sided equilateral.

I was cooking for myself that day. Ember had cooked from the first, but she no longer seemed interested in buttering me up.

"I hired on as a guide," she pointed out, with considerable venom. "Webster's defines guide as —"

"I know what a guide is."

"— and it says nothing about cooking. Will you marry me?"

"No." I wasn't even surprised.

"Same reasons?"

"Yes. I won't enter into an agreement like that lightly. Besides, you're too young."

"Legal age is twelve. I'll be twelve in one week."

"That's too young. On Mars you must be fourteen."

"What a dogmatist. You're not kidding, are you? Is it really fourteen?"

That's typical of her lack of knowledge of the place she was trying so hard to get to. I don't know where she got her ideas about Mars. I finally concluded that she made them up whole in her daydreams.

We ate the meal I prepared in silence, toying with our collection of jewels. I estimated that I had about a thousand Marks worth of uncut stones. And I was getting tired of the Venusian bush. I figured on spending another day collecting, then heading back for the cycle. It would probably be a relief for both of us. Ember could start laying traps for the next stupid tourist to reach town, or even head for Venusburg and try in earnest.

When I thought of that, I wondered why she was still out here. If she had the money to pay the tremendous bribe she had offered me, why wasn't she in town where the tourists were as thick as flies? I was going to ask her that. But she came up to me and sat down very close.

"Would you like to make love?" she asked.

I'd had about enough inducements. I snorted, got up, and walked through the wall of the tent.

Once outside, I regretted it. My back was hurting something terrible, and I belatedly realized that my inflatable mattress would not go through the wall of the tent. If I got it through somehow, it would only burn up. But I couldn't back out after walking out like that. I felt committed. Maybe I couldn't think straight because of the backache; I don't know. Anyway, I picked out a soft-looking spot of ground and lay down.

I can't say it was all that soft.

I came awake in the haze of pain. I knew, without trying, that if I moved I'd get a knife in my back. Naturally I wasn't anxious to try.

My arm was lying on something soft. I moved my head — confirming my suspicions about the knife — and saw that it was Ember. She was asleep, lying on her back. Malibu was curled up in her arm. She was a silver-plated doll, with her mouth open and a look of relaxed vulnerability on her face. I felt a smile growing on my lips, just like the ones she had coaxed out of me back in Prosperity. I wondered why I'd been treating her so bad. At least it seemed to me that morning that I'd been treating her bad. Sure, she'd used me and tricked me and seemed to want to use me again. But what had she hurt? Who was suffering for it? I couldn't think of anyone at the moment. I resolved to apologize to her when she woke up and try to start over again. Maybe we could even reach some sort of accommodation on this adoption business.

And while I was at it, maybe I could unbend enough to ask her to take a look at my back. I hadn't even mentioned it to her, probably for fear of getting deeper in her debt. I was sure she wouldn't have taken payment for it in cash. She preferred flesh.

I was about to awaken her, but I happened to glance on my other side. There was something there. I almost didn't recognize it for what it was.

It was three meters away, growing from the cleft of two rocks. It was globular, half a meter across, and glowing a dull-reddish color. It looked like a soft gelatin.

It was a blast jewel, before the blast.

I was afraid to talk, then remembered that talking would not affect the atmosphere around me and could not set off the explosion. I had a radio transmitter in my throat and a receiver in my ear. That's how you talk on Venus; you subvocalize and people can hear you.

Moving very carefullly, I reached over and gently touched Ember on the shoulder.

She came awake quietly, stretched, and started to get up.

"Don't move," I said, in what I hoped was a whisper. It's hard to do when you're subvocalizing, but I wanted to impress on her that something was wrong.

She came alert, but didn't move.

"Look over to your right. Move very slowly. Don't scrape against the ground or anything. I don't know what to do."

She looked, said nothing.

"You're not alone, Kiku," she finally whispered. "This is one I never heard of."

"How did it happen?"

"It must have formed during the night. No one knows much about how they form or how long it takes. No one's ever been closer than about five hundred meters to one. They always explode before you can get that close. Even the vibrations from the prop of a cycle will set them off before you can get close enough to see them."

"So what do we do?"

She looked at me. It's hard to read expressions on a reflective face, but I think she was scared. I know I was.

"I'd say sit tight."

"How dangerous is this?"

"Brother. I don't know. There's going to be quite a bang when that monster goes off. Our suits will protect us from most of it. But it's going to lift us and accelerate us *very* fast. That kind of sharp acceleration can mess up your insides. I'd say a concussion at the very least."

I gulped. "Then —"

"Just sit tight. I'm thinking."

So was I. I was frozen there with a hot knife somewhere in my back. I knew I'd have to squirm sometime.

The damn thing was moving.

I blinked, afraid to rub my eyes. and looked again. No, it wasn't. Not on the outside anyway. It was more like the movement you can see inside a living cell beneath a microscope. Internal flows, exchanges of fluids from here to there. I watched it and was hypnotized.

There were worlds in the jewel. There was ancient Barsoom of my childhood fairy tales; there was Middle Earth with brooding castles and sentient forests. The jewel was a window into something unimag-

inable, a place where there were no questions and no emotions but a vast awareness. It was dark and wet without menace. It was growing, and yet complete as it came into being. It was bigger than this ball of hot mud called Venus and had its roots down in the core of the planet. There was no corner of the universe that it did not reach.

It was aware of me. I felt it touch me and felt no surprise. It examined me in passing but was totally uninterested. I posed no questions for it, whatever it was. It already knew me and had always known me.

I felt an overpowering attraction. The thing was exerting no influence on me; the attraction was a yearning within me. I was reaching for a completion that the jewel possessed and I knew I could never have. Life would always be a series of mysteries for me. For the jewel, there was nothing but awareness. Awareness of everything.

I wrenched my eyes away at the last possible instant. I was covered in sweat, and I knew I'd look back in a moment. It was the most beautiful thing I will ever see.

"Kiku, listen to me."

"What?" I remembered Ember as from a huge distance.

"Listen. Wake up. Don't look at that thing."

"Ember, do you see anything? Do you feel something?"

"I see something. I...I don't want to talk about it. I can't talk about it. Wake up, Kiku, and don't look back."

I felt like I was already a pillar of salt; so why not look back? I knew that my life would never be quite like it had been. It was like some sort of involuntary religious conversion, like I knew what the universe was for all of a sudden. The universe was a beautiful silk-lined box for the display of the jewel I had just beheld.

"Kiku, that thing should already have gone off. We shouldn't be here. I moved when I woke up. I tried to sneak up on one before and got five hundred meters away from it. I set my foot down soft enough to walk on water, and it blew. So this thing can't be here."

"That's nice," I said. "How do we cope with the fact that it *is* here?"

"All right, all right, it is here. But it must not be finished. It must not have enough nitro in it yet to blow up. Maybe we can get away."

I looked back at it, then away again. It was like my eyes were welded to it with elastic bands; they'd stretch enough to let me turn away, but they kept pulling me back.

"I'm not sure I want to."

"I know," she whispered. "I...hold on, don't look back. We

have to get away."

"Listen," I said, looking at her with an act of will. "Maybe one of us can get away. Maybe both. But it's more important that you not be injured. If I'm hurt, you can maybe fix me up. If you're hurt, you'll probably die, and if we're both hurt, we're dead."

"Yeah. So?"

"So, I'm the closest to the jewel. You can start backing away from it first, and I'll follow you. I'll shield you from the worst of the blast, if it goes off. How does that sound?"

"Not too good." But she thought it over and could see no flaws in my reasoning. I think she didn't relish being the protected instead of the heroine. Childish, but natural. She proved her maturity by bowing to the inevitable.

"All right. I'll try to get ten meters from it. I'll let you know when I'm there, and you can move back. I think we can survive it at ten meters."

"Twenty."

"But...oh, all right. Twenty. Good luck, Kiku. I think I love you." She paused. "Uh, Kiku?"

"What is it? You should get moving. We don't know how long it'll stay stable."

"All right. But I have to say this. My offer last night, the one that got you so angry?"

"Yeah?"

"Well, it wasn't meant as a bribe. I mean, like the twenty thousand Marks. I just...well, I don't know much about that yet. I guess it was the wrong time?"

"Yeah, but don't worry about it. Just get moving."

She did, a centimeter at a time. It was lucky that neither of us had to worry about holding our breath. I think the tension would have been unbearable.

And I looked back. I couldn't help it. I was in the sanctuary of a cosmic church when I heard her calling me. I don't know what sort of power she used to reach me where I was. She was crying.

"Kiku, please listen to me."

"Huh? Oh, what is it?"

She sobbed in relief. "Oh, Christ, I've been calling you for an hour. *Please* come on. Over here, I'm back far enough."

My head was foggy. "Oh, Ember, there's no hurry. I want to look at it just another minute. Hang on."

"*No*! If you don't start moving right this minute, I'm coming back and I'll drag you out."

"You can't do....Oh. All right, I'm coming." I looked over at her sitting on her knees. Malibu was beside her. The little otter was staring in my direction. I looked at her and took a sliding step, scuttling on my back. My back was not something to think about.

I got two meters back, then three. I had to stop to rest. I looked at the jewel, then back at Ember. It was hard to tell which drew me the strongest. I must have reached a balance point. I could have gone either way.

Then a small silver streak came at me, running as fast as it could go. It reached me and dived across.

"*Malibu!*" Ember screamed. I turned. The otter seemed happier than I ever saw him, even in the waterslide in town. He leaped, right at the jewel....

Regaining consciousness was a very gradual business. There was no dividing line between different states of awareness for two reasons: I was deaf, and I was blind. So I cannot say when I went from dreams to reality; the blend was too uniform, there wasn't enough change to notice.

I don't remember learning that I was deaf and blind. I don't remember learning the hand-spelling language that Ember talked to me with. The first rational moment that I can recall as such was when Ember was telling me her plans to get back to Prosperity.

I told her to do whatever she felt best, that she was in complete control. I was desolated to realize that I was not where I had thought I was. My dreams had been of Barsoom. I thought I had become a blast jewel and had been waiting in a sort of detached ecstasy for the moment of explosion.

She operated on my left eye and managed to restore some vision. I could see things that were a meter from my face, hazily. Everything else was shadows. At least she was able to write things on sheets of paper and hold them up for me to see. It made things quicker. I learned that she was deaf, too. And Malibu was dead. Or might be. She had put him in the cooler and thought she might be able to patch him up when she got back. If not, she could always make another otter.

I told her about my back. She was shocked to hear that I had hurt it on the slide down the mountain, but she had sense enough not to scold me about it. It was short work to fix it up. Nothing but a bruised disc, she told me.

It would be tedious to describe all of our trip back. It was difficult, because neither of us knew much about blindness. But I was able to adjust pretty quickly. Being led by the hand was easy enough, and I stumbled only rarely after the first day. On the second day we scaled the mountains, and my tagalong malfunctioned. Ember discarded it and we traded off with hers. We could only do it when I was sitting still, as hers was made for a much shorter person. If I tried to walk

with it, it quickly fell behind and jerked me off balance.

Then it was a matter of being set on the cycle and pedaling. There was nothing to do but pedal. I missed the talking we did on the way out. I missed the blast jewel. I wondered if I'd ever adjust to life without it.

But the memory had faded when we arrived back at Prosperity. I don't think the human mind can really contain something of that magnitude. It was slipping away from me by the hour, like a dream fades away in the morning. I found it hard to remember what it was that was so great about the experience. To this day, I can't really tell about it except in riddles. I'm left with shadows. I feel like an earthworm who has been shown a sunset and has no place to store the memory.

Back in town it was a simple matter for Ember to restore our hearing. She just didn't happen to be carrying any spare eardrums in her first-aid kit.

"It was an oversight," she told me. "Looking back, it seems obvious that the most likely injury from a blast jewel would be burst eardrums. I just didn't think."

"Don't worry about it. You did beautifully."

She grinned at me. "Yes, I did, didn't I?"

The vision was a larger problem. She didn't have any spare eyes and no one in town was willing to sell one of theirs at any price. She gave me one of hers as a temporary measure. She kept her infraeye and took to wearing an eye patch over the other. It made her look bloodthirsty. She told me to buy another at Venusburg, as our blood types weren't much of a match. My body would reject it in about three weeks.

The day came for the weekly departure of the blimp to Last Chance. We were sitting in her workshop, facing each other with our legs crossed and the pile of blast jewels between us.

They looked awful. Oh, they hadn't changed. We had even polished them up until they sparkled three times as much as they had back in the firelight of our tent. But now we could see them for the rotten, yellowed, broken fragments of bone that they were. We had told no one what we had seen out in the Fahrenheit Desert. There was no way to check on it, and all our experience had been purely subjective. Nothing that would stand up in a laboratory. We were the only ones who knew their true nature. Probably we would always remain the only ones. What could we tell anyone?

"What do you think will happen?" I asked.

She looked at me keenly. "I

think you already know that."

"Yeah." Whatever they were, however they survived and reproduced, the one fact we knew for sure was that they couldn't survive within a hundred kilometers of a city. Once there had been blast jewels in the very spot where we were sitting. And humans do expand. Once again, we would not know what we were destroying.

I couldn't keep the jewels. I felt like a ghoul. I tried to give them to Ember, but she wouldn't have them either.

"Shouldn't we tell someone?" Ember asked.

"Sure. Tell anyone you want. Don't expect people to start tiptoeing until you can prove something to them. Maybe not even then."

"Well, it looks like I'm going to spend a few more years tiptoeing. I find I just can't bring myself to stomp on the ground."

I was puzzled. "Why? You'll be on Mars. I don't think the vibrations will travel that far."

She stared at me. "What's this?"

There was a brief confusion; then I found myself apologizing profusely to her, and she was laughing and telling me what a dirty rat I was, then taking it back and saying I could play that kind of trick on her anytime I wanted.

It was a misunderstanding. I honestly thought I had told her about my change of heart while I was deaf and blind. It must have been a dream, because she hadn't gotten it and had assumed the answer was a permanent no. She had said nothing about adoption since the explosion.

"I couldn't bring myself to pester you about it anymore, after what you did for me," she said, breathless with excitement. "I owe you a lot, maybe my life. And I used you badly when you first got here."

I denied it, and told her I had thought she was not talking about it because she thought it was in the bag.

"When did you change your mind?" she asked.

I thought back. "At first I thought it was while you were caring for me when I was so helpless. Now I can recall when it was. It was shortly after I walked out of the tent for that last night on the ground."

She couldn't find anything to say about that. She just beamed at me. I began to wonder what sort of papers I'd be signing when we got to Venusburg: adoption, or marriage contract.

I didn't worry about it. It's uncertainties like that which make life interesting. We got up together, leaving the pile of jewels on the floor. Walking softly, we hurried out to catch the blimp.

LEONARD ISAACS

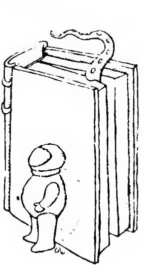
Books

The Mote in God's Eye, Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle, Simon & Schuster, $9.95

The Forever War, Joe Haldeman, St. Martin's Press, $7.95.

Fellowship of the Stars, Terry Carr, ed., Simon & Schuster, $7.95

Nutzenbolts, Ron Goulart, Macmillan, $6.95



The Mote in God's Eye is space opera. Let me quickly add that this is no backhanded, summary dismissal of Larry Niven & Jerry Pournelle's outsize novel as a Western in space drag. I mean that *Mote* — in both its strengths and weaknesses — can revealingly be compared with classic grand opera. And in this quite literal sense, Niven & Pournelle's magnum opus is *the* space opera of the decade, the most thoroughgoing adaptation of the conventions and traditions of elephant-processioned, Valkyrie-trooping opera to the framework of the interstellar sf novel.

The book even begins with a set of program notes. There is presentation of the cast in order of appearance ("Dramatis Personae"), a "Chronology" of events from 1969 to 3017 to provide necessary background for the first act, and a brief overture ("Prologue") that foreshadows the theme of the novel. The only oversight is the absence of a synopsis to the four acts, an omission which this reviewer will forthwith remedy. Act I opens on the Second Empire of Man; the center of action is the Trans-Coalsack Sector. Across this frontier comes the first contact from a nonhuman civilization: a space probe apparently launched from the vicinity of a star known as the Mote. Its alien passenger is found

dead, but this serves as the basis for a survey mission to the Mote system. In Act II real live aliens appear before the audience for the first time. Man and Motie meet in orbit around Mote Prime and speedily attempt to learn about each other. This provides the opportunity for bravura arias by each of the human characters, as well as an occasional private reflection by one of the Moties, delivered — as they used to say — *sotto voce.* The Moties come across as charming and lovable; they are inspired mimics, and soon each human has acquired his very own "Fyunch (click)" — think of them as alien understudies and you won't be far off. The interlude closes, however, on a suddenly sinister leitmotif in which a Motie chorus gives some indication that Things Are Not What They Seem.

By now the experienced space opera goer may be getting a bit restless. He has sat through 2 acts and some 240 pages, and is still not certain about what's got the Moties up in arms (three). Since the program reveals 2 more acts and approximately 300 pages to go, he may well decide, like the reviewer, to take a long intermission at this point.

Settling back into his acceleration couch for Act III, the reader is gently lowered onto Mote Prime. Some insights into the alien culture are gleaned from the local Intourist guides, but the reader tags along for an unscheduled side-trip and finally realizes what makes a Fyunch (click) tick. In Act IV the scene shifts back to the setting of Act I, the Trans-Coalsack Sector. Although the Moties attempt to conceal their secrets, they are dramatically unmasked in the course of a brilliant sextet involving 2 Motie Mediators, 1 Motie Master, 1 space ship captain, 1 lady anthropologist and a disgruntled naval officer who wants to get the whole mess straightened out so he can return to a merchant vessel. Amidst general rejoicing, the Empire is saved and the aliens disarmed (trisarmed?) and demoted as the viewscreens dim on this final chorus.

Parallels between *Mote* and 19th century Romantic opera do not end with structure. Unsympathetic critics have often attacked grand opera for its unconvincing librettos and stereotyped characterization. But I will argue that it is these conventional plot devices and hackneyed characters that help ensure popular audiences for the old warhorses. We have come to demand ill-starred heroes, consumptive heroines, passionate and half-crazed gypsies, simple but generous peasants, and unscrupulous aristocratic plotters. The very appearance of one or more of these

stereotypes confirms that we're seeing an authentic exemplar of the art form. I am happy to report that *Mote* cleaves to this time-honored tradition; in its ability to project one-dimensional characters upon four-dimensional hyperspace. *The Mote in God's Eye* has few modern equals.

Mote's tenor lead is Roderick Harold, Lord Blaine: scion of one of the Empire's leading families, master of the Imperial Navy space ship *MacArthur*, ruggedly handsome in spite of a slightly crooked nose acquired in a recent battle and, though prey to inner doubts, ultimately decisive in action. He stands erect as both sexual symbol and embodiment of all the male virtues we have come to expect in the hero of a space opera; he is referred to throughout the novel as "Rod." The coloratura role is that of Lady Sandra (Sally) Liddell Leonovna Bright Fowler, B.A., M.S., doctoral candidate in anthropology, Imperial University. Although she has grown up in the middle of the Imperial Court, and although she has been held captive on a rebellious planet where "those months in the prison camp had burned something out of her," the authors do not allow Sally's extensive experience of the real world to distract her from the appointed feminine role. Her favorite expletive remains "Pooh," and as the only woman aboard ship with a thousand men, she

> missed what she thought of as girl talk. Marriage and babies and house-keeping and scandals: they were a part of civilized life. She hadn't known how big a part until the New Chicago revolt caught her up, and she missed it even more now. Sometimes in desperation she had talked recipes with *MacArthur's* cooks as a poor substitute, but her only other feminine-oriented mind within light years was — her Fyunch (click).

In the impassioned motie-human sextent at the end of the book, Sally can be relied upon to express the superficial, emotional and illogical arguments her role demands — even though assertions that her Fyunch (click) couldn't have lied to her would have netted her a failing grade in Intro. Anthro. back at old Imperial U. But as was pointed out earlier in the novel, "If Sally had known more of people instead of academic psychology...."

"Where's the villain?" the experienced opera goer will ask. His Excellency Horace Hussein Chamoun al Shamlan Bury (bass), Trader and Magnate, at your service. Bury is, even without

three-gee acceleration, a heavy. From his homeworld of Levant, Bury has planted agents throughout the Empire. On board *MacArthur* as a result of his suspected complicity in the New Chicago revolt, he is accompanied only by his faithful servant Nabil,

> a small man, much smaller than Horace, younger than he looked, with a ferret face that could be disguised many ways, and skills with dagger and poison learned on ten planets.

That Bury comes from a social/theological/moral tradition which sets him apart from the other main characters is subtly suggested by prefacing each of his dark mutterings with phrases such as "By the Prophet" or "In the Name of Allah," and by having him respond to such straight lines as "The higher their civilization, the more they'll have to trade" with thoughts like "And the harder they'd be to cheat."

Only a brief mention can be given here of the finely-wrought supporting roles. A science-administrator who repeatedly opposes the military on the basis of humanitarian or scientific quibbles is proven wrong every time; although he is the Minister of Science for the entire Sector, he has absolutely no awareness of the realities of Imperial politics. He is finally shut up by the offer of a Barony. He is merely the egghead-in-chief, however, of a clutch of scientific incompetents who "confused acceleration warning with battle stations." Then there's Admiral Lavrenti Kutuzov ("the Butcher") who wiped out an entire planet to stop a rebellion, but underneath the polar bear persona is a simple, direct man. The Admiral tends to leave out all definite and indefinite articles when he speaks Anglic, but this is more than made up for by the crew members from New Scotland who drop so many hae's, tae's, nae's, aye's and ken's into their conversation that one needs a wee dirk to cut through it. It is somehow reassuring in these present troubled times, when change seems to crowd in on us from every side, to find that 500 light years and a millennium haven't made people any different from the folks we used to know back home on Earth.

The least conventional roles in grand opera are often those of the exotics — characters who must of necessity be imagined afresh because there are no previous models suitable to the demands of the plot. In Wagner, for example, the Nibelung dwarfs are far more interesting than the rather tedious gods and heroes. It is in this area

that *Mote* exhibits its most saving grace. The Motie culture is intelligently and imaginatively constructed. There is far more diversity in the presentation of individual Moties — differentiated by caste, physiology and modes of thought and behavior — than is represented by the entire human Dramatis Personae. And all the most convincing moments of humor, fear or anger belong to the Moties. In short, the Moties upstage the stars; they are, in fact, among the most fully realized aliens ever to debut before a science fiction audience, and worth the price of admission in themselves.

No real opera lover is going to be turned off to *Il Trovatore* by complaints about its being an awful lot of fuss over some addle-brained gypsy throwing the wrong baby into the fire. *Mote* has a galactic setting, hyperspace travel, hyperthyroid action, tried-and-true characters, and understudies — Fyunch (clicks) remember? — who save the show. Space opera buffs will love it.

Having ridden my operatic hobbyhorse halfway across the timestream, I won't even pretend to dismount. The operatic models for sf that I've been holding forth on are mostly 19th century. Composers who have wanted to write a *twentieth* century opera seem to have had only two choices open to them. They could write their 19th century opera and add on a few contemporary trappings — Valkyries with motorcycles helmets or, as in Niven & Pournelle, space helmets. This route has generally led to popular applause and critical abuse. The alternative is to write a 20th century work from the ground up. In musical terms this has often meant atonality, dissonance and sharp-edged chromatics coupled to unpleasant, if not agonized, themes and characters; these works have frequently garnered critical raves and popular rejection. Interstellar conflict transforms an sf novel into space opera almost by definition; Joe Haldeman, in *The Forever War*, has opted for the gritty realism of the 20th century model rather than the familiar romanticism of the 19th. I'm optimistic enough to think that his novel will capture both critical raves *and* popular sales.

"Tonight we're going to show you eight silent ways to kill a man," a sergeant lectures in the opening paragraph; Private Mandella promptly falls asleep. The reader, on the other hand, is abruptly jolted awake; he may have been expecting a rewrite of *Starship Troopers* or *The Hardy Boys at the Space Academy* and instead finds himself plunged into the only sf novel since Kate Wilhelm's *The Killer Thing* that treats war as a

personal and collective horror rather than an occasion for a spirited rendition of the *Soldiers' Chorus*. This is a future war, and it takes off from the technological and psychological innovations we've already trial-tested. One needs highly sophisticated personnel to fight a future war, and an Elite Conscription Act provides them, both men and women. In fighting suits that allow survival at 2 degrees above absolute zero, the only difference between the genders is a modified internal relief tube. Women command units about as frequently as men, and the sexes sleep with each other (on a mandatory rotating basis) once they get out of the suits and back to the barracks. A training sergeant had a skull the wrong shape because a head wound is an ugly thing, and recruits die just as thoroughly under realistic combat simulations as they do on alien battlefields.

Much of Haldeman's writing is as sharp-edged as a weapon; laser-finger attachments to fighting suits mean that "I had a magic wand that I could point at a life and make it a smoking piece of half-raw meat." Indoctrination films and lectures are supplemented by post-hypnotic suggestion; one of the most chillingly effective scenes in the novel is the conflict in the mind of an intelligent, highly-educated and unwillingly-conscripted soldier who consciously rejects the absurd pseudo-memories of enemy aliens implanted in his mind even as he laser-fingers them in berserker rage.

Haldeman's talent for verisimilitude is not limited to battle scenes; his descriptions of collapsar Stargates (black holes allowing ships to pop up elsewhere in the universe) and of the physical and psychological consequences of relativistic time dilations only add to the sense of realism. (I surmise a number of advanced physics courses in his background.) His treatment of these esoteric phenomena is easy and unforced: Mandella understands the subject and treats it as casually and as accurately as one would expect of a physics draftee. Haldeman's exposition of relativity extends to the social realm as well as the physical. The parochialism of cultural evolution in *Mote* is unflatteringly highlighted by the treatment of similar concepts in *The Forever War*; a simple comparison between the variety of surnames represented in the Dramatis Personae of *Mote* and those appearing in the strike-force Tables of Organization in *War* sums up the difference.

Lest the reader fear that *The Forever War* is more anti-war tract than sf novel, let me assert that it has characters who are sexual beings rather than sexist symbols,

that they must cope with changes in cultural and sexual mores, that they have moments of humor as well as pain, and that the novel's relativistic effects are paralleled by its near light-speed pace. For this reviewer the only serious problem emerges in the final twenty or so pages. A close-contact battle ensues between humans and aliens, which begins to take on a more traditional space-operatic character as 42 earthmen mop up 600 aliens. That is shortly followed by a one-page revelation of the true causes and denouement of the 1143-year-long war: it was essentially a problem of communication. Mandella himself opines how "It sounded a little fishy, but I was willing to accept it." Well, after all he's been through, he has some right to send his critical judgment on furlough, but it still sounds fishy to *me.* (Yes, I say that even while realizing that our own Forever War has gone from 15-year stalemate to closure in something like a month, but Vietnam is bad fantasy, not science fiction.) Moreover, there's even an upbeat ending. Haldeman is good enough that the groundwork for these happy resolutions has been laid in the plot itself; what bothers me, then, is not that they're illogical intrusions on the story line, but rather that their tone and mood is at variance with all that went before. It's as though in the last few moments Haldeman wavered in his decision for realistic as opposed to romantic opera, and tacked an exuberant love-duet from the finale of *The Barber of Seville* onto, say, Alban Berg's *Wozzeck. The Forever War* merits plenty of curtain calls regardless.

After his total immersion in human-alien conflict, the reader might like to depressurize gradually and meet a few aliens on more social terms. *Fellowship of the Stars* edited by Terry Carr would seem to be just the thing; the introduction promises "a compilation of all-new science fiction stories on the theme of friendship between human and alien beings." Contributors to this laudable exercise in galactic amity range from the long-established pros to the relative newcomers: Alan Dean Foster, Geo. Alec Effinger, Frederik Pohl, Mildred Downey Broxon, Fritz Leiber, Pamela Sargent, Alan Brennert, John Brunner and Ursula K. Le Guin. A closer inspection, however, reveals that this fictional brotherhood has an open admissions policy. Leiber's story, "Do You Know Dave Wenzel?", deals not with the stars but with the "alien" in ourselves. Le Guin does not focus on any stellar friendships either, though she does portray terrestrially exotic forms of art and communication. A couple of other

stories by Effinger and Pohl would satisfy the truth-in-packaging definition of friendship only if followed by the warning, "With such friends, you don't need...." Such caveats aside, Le Guin provides the funniest and most virtuoso entry in the collection with "The Author of the Acacia Seeds and Other Extracts from *The Journal of the Association of Therolinguistics.*" She can dispatch people who talk with their plants, aesthetic and linguistic theoreticians, articles in learned academic journals, and our feeble present-day efforts at nonhuman communication at one stroke: "'Do you realize,' the phytolinguist will say to the aesthetic critic, 'that they couldn't even read Eggplant?'" Pohl, for his part, takes what we all really knew aliens to be like anyway, and gives us a wickedly contemporary realization of it in "Enjoy, Enjoy." The remaining stories actually do concern themselves with human-alien friendship; the most interesting for me were the efforts of Sargent and Brennert. Sargent's "Shadows" is beautifully written and characterized but ultimately provides a mystical cop-out for the aliens' intrusion into our internal affairs. Brennert's "In This Image" is the most successful attempt in the collection to treat the differences in needs and expectations that separate man and alien. Some of *Fellowship's* probes make it to the stars while others don't get very far off the ground, but after *Mote* and *The Forever War* the reader may decide to spend a couple of relaxed evenings in his camp chair contemplating the trajectories.

You might think that the machines of Ron Goulart's *Nutzenbolts* should be classified as aliens so as to tie up this review neatly, but they are all too human. In his latest collection, with 11 stories mostly from the 70's, Goulart enjoys "juxtaposing future man with future gadgets, and then watching what happens." A few of the stories seem like whimsical handles for a good exit line, but all are light of touch, and most evoke wry musings as we watch gloriously ordinary and slightly-distracted human beings fumble their way through the automated, swinging future. Goulart's befuddled heroes must not only deal with computerized mate-swapping and Handi-Swede Massaging Hands, but simultaneously compete with well-hung android gigolos, android credit collectors who like to play double-or-nothing, and android nurses who never let you talk to the doctor. Come to think of it, I haven't been able to get an appointment with my own doctor in two years.

From Mel Gilden: "I was born in Chicago on July 3, 1947...grew up in Los Angeles in what some people call the borsht belt—a middle-class neighborhood roughly the size of the Sinai Peninsula. CBS Television, located in the middle of it, calls it Hollywood. 'A Lamed Wufnik' is the second ethnic story I've written, though it is the first successful one."

A Lamed Wufnik

by MEL GILDEN

A few hours after Mottle Hamana had a heart attack, he died on a bed of rags in his hovel in Estonia, a country that lately had fallen into the hands of the Russians. No one was in attendance but God. The death of a dog would have caused more comment than the death of Mottle Hamana. He was forgotten almost before he was buried.

At the moment Mottle Hamana died, Sol Gosnik, asleep in his bed in Los Angeles, California, waved his arms at phantom invaders caused by too late a dinner, and mumbling curses and threats, he turned over and crushed his face into his pillow.

When he awoke the next morning, the smell of strong tea already filled the apartment. His eyes blinked open and he saw his wife, Sylvia, standing at the door to their bedroom. "Nu, Sol, you going to sleep all day like the Czar?"

"I'll be up in a minute. Look how my foot moves with enthusiasm underneath the covers."

"Hurray for your foot. Your oatmeal will get cold." Sylvia — dependable, hard-working, ample, Sylvia — turned and walked back down the short hallway to the square box of a kitchen where she rattled pots, pans, and dishes on purpose to keep her husband from falling back asleep.

Sol Gosnik threw back the covers and felt the cold seep into his legs. It would stay there all day long, until he pulled the covers back over himself that night. The doctor said it was bad circulation and a man his age should take it easy.

Sol had told him, "So, Mr. Doctor, you're a pretty smart man. You tell me how I'm going to feed my own mouth and the mouth of my Sylvia if I don't work. God is going to make it rain nickels, maybe?"

"Surely there must be a pension plan of sorts where you work."

"Of course. What would Motimer's Distinctive Fashions be without a pension plan? But I don't get it for another two years."

"You're only sixty-three. That's right. I'd forgotten."

"Mr. Mortimer don't forget."

The doctor had given Sol some pills. They were samples given to the doctor by the drug distributor and so Sol got them for nothing. Sol took one every morning for months; as far as he was concerned, the pills were worth what they cost him.

Sol got out of bed and put on his clothes. He listened to the boards creak as he crossed the wooden floor to the bathroom and felt for the string in the dark. He pulled it, and the room suddenly assaulted him with harsh white light reflected from every glass and tile surface. The mirror above the sink showed him for what he was: a moderately old human being just waking up and caught with his hand raised to turn on the light.

He looked at himself, revealed thus, and saw a man with the grey grit of a day's worth of beard on his thin face, a man who looked much older than sixty-three. He smiled bleakly, telling himself it was all right. Someday he would be as old as he looked. He washed and shaved, and walked along the grey hallway to the kitchen. Sylvia was sitting at the Formica-topped table reading the *Forward* from the day before.

"So, what's new?"

"New," Sylvia said, "is what's new. The Arabs — they should only have a pyramid fall over on them — are at it again. Sit down. Eat. The bus won't wait."

"There'll be another bus."

"Look who's suddenly Mr. Leisure World." She dished up the oatmeal and gave it to him. He poured a little milk on it.

Sylvia said, "Did you take your pill?"

"For all the good it does me."

Sol ate a little oatmeal. It was warm and sweet and made him feel better. It was almost as if his icy legs belonged to someone else. He said, "Sylvia, how old do I look?"

"A day older than you did yesterday."

"No. I mean, do I look sixty-three?"

"You've been looking in the mirror again."

"It's either that or cut myself when I shave."

"Sol, Sol, Sol." She put her

hand on his. "Stop looking and figuring and just live."

"You call this living?"

"Who are you feeling sorry for? Yourself? I'm all right."

"You should've had better."

"You want I should be the Queen of Sheba?"

"I don't know." He put the spoon down.

"Finish."

"I don't want any more."

"A real wufnik."

"Sylvia, please."

"And even if you are a wufnik, you can share the problems of the world with thirty-five other men."

"Is my lunch ready?"

"In forty years has it ever not been ready?"

Sol admitted that there was no time when the lunch had failed to appear in its brown bag as promised. He kissed Sylvia — a peck on the cheek — and walked downstairs to the street.

The sun was just above the horizon, and Fairfax Avenue looked new. He walked by a bakery and smelled the warm velvety aroma of fresh bagels. Like the bakery, other small shops selling kosher meat and fish, and prayer books, and candy, and corsets were all closed until more respectable hours. Even the big delicatessen, Cantor's — which never closed — had only a smattering of people in it. The pale sunlight of dawn rounded off corners, smoothed over cracks, and brought out colors. If Sol Gosnik's legs hadn't been hurting him, he could have been content. For when did a rich man who gets up in the middle of the afternoon ever get to enjoy the cool quiet sensations of Fairfax Avenue in the morning?

While Sol was waiting for his bus, a moving van went up the street. His bus came at last and he got on. Fairfax bus to Wilshire. Wilshire bus downtown.

It was almost nine o'clock by the time he got to Mortimer's Distinctive Fashions, a two-story stucco building, now a faded green, which stood between a hot dog stand and a pay-by-the-hour parking lot. Downstairs were the offices and the shipping department. Upstairs were the cutting rooms and the long lines of sewing machines. This was where Sol Gosnik labored all day. He was a first-class tailor. In the old country he was going to be a rabbi, but he discovered that in Depression America being a tailor paid better. And after all, he had to live, no?

Sol went in through the double glass doors and said "hello" to Marian the receptionist, a pretty black girl Mr. Mortimer had hired to keep peace with some of the social-action groups that roamed

the city looking for racial injustice.

Marian said, "Oh, Sol, Mr. Mortimer wants to see you."

"About what?"

"He didn't say."

Sol nodded and walked down the hallway and knocked on Mr. Mortimer's door.

"Come in."

Sol went in and stood with his hat in hand with his lunch. Mr. Mortimer's secretary smiled at him. It was a strange kind of smile, sorry and commiserating, full of some meaning Sol couldn't understand just yet. Sol, standing there in his jacket and muffler, suddenly felt warm. He unbottoned his jacket and let the muffler hang loose.

"Good morning, Sol, come in. Would you like some coffee?"

"No, thank you, Mr. Mortimer. It gives me heartburn."

Coffee, he's offering me, Sol thought. This is some kind of big deal.

"Sit down, Sol."

"Thank you, sir."

"Sol, you've been with me a long time, haven't you?"

"About ten years."

"And in all that time, we've gotten along very well. I treat my employees like people. You've always recognized this and done right by me too."

"I do my best."

"I know you do, Sol, and that's why this is so difficult."

"You have a problem?"

Mr. Mortimer took a long drag on his coffee, put it down and looked past Sol at his secretary. He looked at Sol again and said, "You know business hasn't been very good lately."

"The whole country's a mess. I heard it on the news."

"That's right, Sol. That's right." He drank some more coffee. "We've all got to tighten our belts." He waited.

Sol said, "Is there a point here somewhere that I'm missing, Mr. Mortimer?"

"I'm going to have to lay off a few people."

Sol waited for Mr. Mortimer to say more.

"I'm not firing you, Sol. I'll write you a letter of recommendation. But I just can't afford to keep you on."

"For this I got up at 5:30 in the morning?"

"I wanted to tell you in person."

"So. You're a big humanitarian. You tell me in person you're kicking me out into the street."

"You'll be paid to the end of the week."

"And my pension?"

"I'm afraid that's out of the question."

"Ten years is forgotten so fast?"

"I'm sorry."

"If I could afford it, Mr. Mortimer, I'd make you a bet I'm sorrier than you are."

Mr. Mortimer came around his desk and solemnly shook hands with Sol, only the second time they'd done so. The first time was when Mr. Mortimer had hired him ten years before. The secretary smiled at Sol. He waved without energy and left. He went down the hall to the payroll office.

While Sol waited for Annie the clerk to make out the check, he thought about what his wife had said that morning about being a wufnik. It was an old joke between them. It meant nothing, Sol told himself. Out loud he said, "A real wufnik."

"What's that?" Annie said.

Sol repeated himself.

"What's a wufnik?"

"A lamed wufnik," Sol said. "He's a man — one of only thirty-six — who justifies the existence of everybody on this planet."

"You mean like a lawyer?"

"No. Nothing like a lawyer. He's a righteous man who makes it worthwhile for God to let mankind go on. One of thirty-six excuses. They're always righteous, always ignorant of their stature in the scheme of things, and always poor." He shook his head. "Sol Gosnik, the lamed wufnik."

"That's tough," Annie said, "getting fired like this."

Sol raised a finger in the air. "Not fired. Laid off." He shrugged. "You're just as hungry either way."

"Here's your check."

"Thanks."

"You'll find another job."

"Who's going to hire a man my age?"

On his way out, Sol shook his fist at Mr. Mortimer's door, hurled a curse that moths should eat his distinctive fashions off their hangers, and left.

There was excitement when he got home. A moving van was in front of the building, and men were running every-which-way unloading. The furniture, though plain, was heavy and of good quality. A dark Semitic man watched the progress from one side.

"Good morning, Gosnik," the man said as Sol went by.

"Good morning." Sol hustled past. How had the man known his name? Did he know him? He turned to study the man as furniture went by, and he found the odd dark man looking at him. Sol nodded and hurried upstairs.

From above he heard a woman shouting, giving directions to the movers. "No, not there, you fool! Over in the corner. Be careful, klutz, that's an antique!" An-

unpleasant sort of woman. Sol had never heard her before. She was probably the wife of the man downstairs.

Sol followed the procession of chairs, beds, bureaus, and tables up the stairs until he came to his apartment. The furniture was going into the empty apartment next door. "Meshugana!" the woman cried at one of the moving men.

Sol let himself in. Shouts and pounding came from the next apartment through the common wall in the kitchen. "Sylvia?" Sol called.

Sol looked through the whole place, through the whole four rooms, and she wasn't there. She had probably gone shopping. Sol put his uneaten lunch in the refrigerator, fixed himself a glass of tea and sat down at the kitchen table to wait for her to come back.

When Sylvia got home, Sol was in their bedroom sitting on the edge of the bed. "You're home early," she said.

"I'm home permanently."

"Permanently?"

"Mr. Mortimer laid me off."

"He lets go a man like you? What kind of a crazy is he?"

"He says he can't afford me."

Sylvia took off her heavy black coat. Sol was glad she had it, and also glad he'd paid cash for it. If there had been payments to make, he wouldn't be able to make them now.

"So, it's a blessing. We can sleep a little later in the morning."

"And how are we going to eat?"

"We'll think of something. Wait." She went to the closet to hang up her coat. "I have an idea already."

Sol waited for the idea.

Sylvia dragged something out from behind the clothes in the closet. "Look what I got here."

"My old sewing machine."

"Congratulations."

"Nu?"

"Nu. What nu? You don't see it?"

"I don't see what?"

"You can go into business for yourself."

Sol thought it over for a moment. He was in no mood for consolation or bright ideas. He wanted to enjoy his torment in peace. He said, "Sylvia, my darling dummy, to go into business I need three things. For one, I need a tailor. For two, I need a sewing machine. Those I got."

"You got. Nu shane?"

"I need also customers."

"Customers will come."

"How? By magic?"

"Put an ad in the paper."

"With what?"

"We got a little money saved."

"Which we got to eat on."

Sylvia threw up her hands and strode into the kitchen. "All right," she said above the racket coming from the next apartment, "you're determined to sit there like a martyr, go ahead. I got groceries to put away."

A few minutes later Sol followed her. He sat down at the kitchen table. "What's going on next door? A moving-in or the end of the world?"

"When they're settled they'll be quiet."

"Could be."

Sylvia put a package of frozen lima beans into the freezer. "Klutz-kashe!" the lady next door yelled. "A real circus," Sylvia said.

Sol waited a moment. He said, "I've been thinking about me and the lamed wufniks."

"Good, Mr. Gosnik. Think. So far it's free."

"You're going to be Jack Benny, I'll be quiet."

"I'm just kidding. Go ahead. Talk."

"I've been thinking maybe I am one."

Sylvia put a hand to his forehead. "A temperature you haven't got."

"You think it's not possible?"

"Listen, Soly, there are a lot of poor men in the world. There are even a lot of righteous poor men. But there are only thirty-six lamed wufniks. What are your chances?"

"Not good, it sounds like."

"And even if I really believed there are such things — which, by the way, I don't — I hope you would have the good grace not to. If you believe and you're right, according to the rules, you die.

"Maybe it's not such a bad deal."

"You going to leave me all alone? Who am I going to hollar on?"

"I'm just talking, Sylvia. Nothing but talk."

With Sylvia's help, Sol figured out what he would say in his newspaper ad. He wrote it in English and would put it in *The Reporter*, the local throwaway paper. "If they read *The Forward*," Sylvia had said, "they don't have any money."

Sol walked downstairs. Despite all efforts to the contrary, he felt better than he had when he came home. He carried the ad in his pocket like a key to a new life. He whistled a melody from the Old Country he hadn't even thought about in years.

Out on the sidewalk, the dark man was talking to the movers. Without glancing at them, Sol walked down the street to Fairfax Avenue, where he would place the ad in the *Reporter* office.

He heard running behind him. "Gosnik, Gosnik!" a voice called.

Sol turned and the dark man came up beside him. He said, "Mind if I walk with you?"

"It's a free country," Sol said.

They walked for a while without saying anything. The neighborhood was quiet because it was a weekday and the kids were in school. The man made Sol nervous, he couldn't say why. Perhaps it was because the man made little smiles every so often for no apparent reason, as if he were remembering a small private joke.

At last Sol said, "It's a nice neighborhood, no?"

"If you can afford to live here."

Now that was a strange reaction. Did Sol look so poverty-stricken already? Had his clothing become threadbare just since he was fired? He said, "It's cheap enough."

"If you have a job."

"What's all this about jobs?"

"I heard you upstairs in the kitchen."

"Ah. And while we're on the subject of who knows what, how did you know my name?"

"I heard it mentioned."

"Where?"

"When I came to look at the apartment. The landlord pointed out that you would be my next-door neighbor."

"Ah." They walked. That explained a lot, Sol thought. Maybe the fellow wasn't so sinister after all. They walked past the newsstand, nearly a block long, run by a man almost everybody called behind his back, "The Weasel." Sol felt an urgency about getting to the newspaper office, and he did not stop and browse among the paperback books the way he usually did. Sol and the dark man turned a corner.

"So, you think you're a wufnik, eh?" the man said.

Sol looked at him, his eyes wide with surprise. Then he remembered the thin kitchen wall. He said, "I don't know how you could hear all that with so much moving-in noise."

"What a mouth my Lili has. Vocal cords like a mule."

"A strong woman is good to have. Like my Sylvia."

"There's good, and there's good," the man said.

"That's true."

They stopped for a red light. When the light turned green and they started walking again, the man said, "Why did you think you're a wufnik?"

"Why not? It's an honorable profession."

"It doesn't pay well."

"Money isn't everything."

"You can't eat honor."

"And money won't get me into heaven. So nu?"

The man laughed, Perhaps he thought, like Sol, it was pleasant to

joust with a man who had a quick tongue.

The man said, "Suppose I could tell you I knew for sure you were a wufnik — one of the thirty-six blessed men."

"I would say you were crazy. No one knows such things but God."

"Word slips out."

"You're talking meshugaas."

"So. It can't hurt to talk."

They came to the *Reporter* office, and Sol ran inside with a promise he would be right back. The dark man waited outside, staring at him through the plate glass window with the yellow plastic shade behind it. Sol did his business and came out. He said, "They say it'll be in next week's paper. They say an ad like that ought to bring in a lot of customers."

"Don't count on it. A wufnik must be poor."

"So you still want to talk meshugaas."

The man shrugged. "It will make an interesting discussion."

"All right, so discuss."

The man spoke with more intensity now. Evidently interesting discussions excited him. He said, "What if I told you you *are* a lamed wufnik?"

"I wouldn't believe you."

"Why?"

"Because, Mr. Interesting Discussion, if it is true and I believe it, I die. It is written that a man who is a lamed wufnik must never know it. Who would take care of my Sylvia then and keep her from being lonely? And if it's not true, why should I believe and be a fool?"

"You're too reasonable."

"I have been accused of worse things. And by less mysterious acquaintances than you."

"The rest of your life will not be pleasant."

"You're a regular tummeler, aren't you?"

The man shrugged again. "I just don't want you to expect too much."

"Expecting is also for fools. I work. I hope. That's enough."

"You'll die anyway."

"So when I get to heaven, God will explain to me what's going on here with your discussions."

The man cocked his head to one side and thought for a moment. He said, "You're a worthy man, Sol Gosnik. A good choice."

"Thank you for your analysis, Mr. Cronkite."

While they walked back to the apartment building, Sol thought about the crazy person next to him. Was he dangerous? With crazy people it was hard to tell. Sol only hoped he and his wife with the vocal cords would be quiet once they got settled.

They walked upstairs and parted at Sol's door. Sol said, "By

the way, mister, you have a name?"

"Yes. You can call me Sholstein."

"A good name. Good day, Mr. Sholstein."

"Good day, Mr. Gosnik."

Sol told Sylvia about the discussion he'd had with Mr. Sholstein, the new next-door neighbor. Sylvia called the fellow a real joker, and she made Sol laugh about him while she helped set up the sewing machine.

There was no noise from the Sholstein apartment that next week. "You see," Sylvia said, "I told you nothing was to worry about." The week after that, when the ad was in *The Reporter,* they got only three calls for tailoring.

"Barely enough for rent," Sol said. His legs were two icicles.

"It'll get better."

"What if not?"

"We'll get along. I'll get a job at Rexall."

Sol didn't answer.

Sylvia said, "You're thinking again, Sol. That's not good."

"I'm thinking about how I got thirty-six chances out of billions of people to be poor through life and holy forever."

"Not very good odds. Wait till the money starts pouring in."

"I'm waiting."

Sol turned his head suddenly as if he'd heard something. He said quietly, "You hear how empty it sounds next door? I haven't seen Sholstein since that first day. Maybe he and his loud-mouthed wife are gone. Very strange the way they came and went like that."

He looked at his wife with tears in his eyes. "Help me, Sylvia," he said. "It is such a temptation to believe too much!"

Coming next month...

"Friday the Thirteenth," a brand new Black Widowers tale from ISAAC ASIMOV, a JACK WILLIAMSON novlelet, "The Machines That Ate Too Much," and a new novella by Gary K. Wolf concerning the amazing adventures of two wild and wonderful characters, "Doctor Rivet and Supercon Sal."

In which the idea of aliens infiltrating Earth is carried out to a level of goofiness rarely before achieved...

In Case of Danger, Prsp the Ntxivbw

by CHARLES W. RUNYON

With silver tongue and cheek of brass, I canvassed a valley suburb of watered lawns and trimmed evergreens. I was Joseph Q. College, shining fringe of golden hair tucked under my ears, striped blazer loose around my wrists.

I jabbed the doorbell of a two-story brick colonial and buffed my shoes on my pants.

The woman was ash-blonde, hair done close to her head in tight metallic curls. She wore a black dress and silver earrings.

I'm not buying anything, said her pinched lips.

I handed her the classic pitch, first the joke to chase the tight lines from her face. Next I pulled the catalog folder from my hip pocket, laid it on her forearm, and released it. She had to catch it or let it fall.

She caught it.

I took out my pad and wrote down her name and address while she looked at the folder. She began shaking her head, like a mechanical doll with its battery running down.

I realized my sound pickup wasn't functioning. I slid my hand under my blazer and turned the control knob in my armpit.

"— DON'T THINK I CAN AFFORD —!"

I modulated the volume.

"Anything this year with —"

Too shrill. I turned up the bass. Her voice settled into a pleasant contralto.

"— the economic situation being what it is" She looked at me suddenly. "Have you got lice?"

"No, madame."

"Then stop scratching yourself like an ape."

"I wasn't scratching. I was adjusting. Please, read the catalog. Note that payments do not begin until the buyer is completely satisfied."

She frowned down at the

catalog, then squinted up into my face. "This doesn't say what product you're selling."

"The ultimate product, madame. The end-goal of all human endeavor. Happiness."

She snorted a laugh. "You can't sell happiness."

"Madame, that is, if you'll pardon the expression, a self-evident fallacy. Would I be selling happiness if it could not be sold?"

"I mean — you can't possibly deliver." Suddenly she looked uncertain. "*Can you?*"

"Our guarantee is absolutely ironclad." I reached inside my blazer and pulled out a new hundred-dollar bill. "This is yours the moment you agree to accept our service. If you are not completely happy, you keep the money without obligation."

She took the bill, examined it on both sides, then rolled it into a tight tube and slid it under her wedding band. "What's to prevent me saying I'm not happy when I really am?"

"Nothing at all, except your innate honesty." I turned up my virility projector and smiled. "Just place your hand on the pad, and the contract will be automatically recorded."

She drew back, giving me a thin-eyed look. I turned my virility dial to max and let my lower jaw slide into a loose, appealing grin. She touched the pad.

Immediately her eyes rolled back. I caught her before she hit the doormat and stepped inside with her unconscious form hanging across my arm. I laid her down on the hall carpet, rolled her onto her stomach, and took my trepanning kit from my abdominal cavity. I smeared coagulant behind her right ear, sliced out a round flap of skin and clamped it back. Zzzzt! went the little round saw. Flakes of bone and clotted blood flew. I lifted out the disk of the skull, took from my storage compartment a white ovoid about the size of a robin's egg, and pressed it down into the gray spongy mass of her brain. I smeared healant cream on the rim of the skull cavity and tapped the disc in place with the handle of my scalpel. Thok-thok.

As I pasted back the skin flap, a tiny blonde dog ran out of the bedroom expelling shrill yaps of high-decibel sound.

Turning up my virility projector only made the beast hysterical. Its claws skidded on the waxed floor as it clamped its jaws on my wrist. One of its canine teeth pierced the syntho-plastic flesh of my forearm. I was forced, finally, to spray nerve-toc into its bristly snarling muzzle. It died peacefully in midyap.

I vacuumed the blood and bone flecks off the carpet and revived the

woman. She sat up, pressed her fingers to her temples, and smiled at the dog lying with its four legs straight up.

"Is Ting-ling dead?"

"Yes. How do you feel?"

"I'm just so happy. We'll bury him in that new pet cemetery and carry flowers and it will be so wonderful—!" She stared at me, her eyes going round. "There's something wrong with this."

"If you're happy, there's nothing wrong. Now if you'll give back that hundred dollar bill, we'll set up the payment schedule and I'll be off."

She pulled the twisted banknote from her ring, smoothed it out, and seemed to study it. Her lower lip slid out. "I remember how Ting-ling used to lick between my toes after I'd bathed. He liked the taste of bathsalts, you know. I think I feel just a little bit ... unhappy."

"Possibly I musjudged your innate honesty."

"If that means you're not getting back the money, you're not."

"But it's all they issued me. I don't have facilities for making new bills."

I stood indecisive, eyeing the bill in her hand. Physically, I was capable of pinching her arm off at the elbow, but my inhibitor circuit would not permit aggressive moves against humans. I turned up my virility projector and gave her the full force of my eyes.

"You're not really unhappy, are you?"

Her eyes slid away. "Well ... I'll really miss having my toes licked. You guaranteed *complete* happiness, you know."

A message glowed on my retina: THE CUSTOMER'S EB#TT MUST BE EGL¢P WSMRT DR&PST WITHOUT EXCEPTION. It was one of the garbled directives they beamed into my colloidal brain when I faced a situation not covered by preprogramming. Whether the fault lay in the transmitter, or in the magnetic storms I'd passed through during my trip through the cosmos, I didn't know. If I'd understood the directive, I'd have had no choice but to obey. As it was. I could choose the obvious solution.

I dropped to my knees. "Very well, madame. Sit down and take off your shoes."

While she was giggling and throwing her hips around, she dropped the crumpled bill. I snatched it up and got to my feet. "Now, as regards the payment schedule..."

She stopped laughing long enough to choose a twenty-year payment plan, and I approved her credit on the spot. It wasn't really important, since the Arcturan

Hegemony would soon eradicate credit institutions along with all other aspects of human culture.

I left her in a roseate glow and walked to the next house. The occupant had long sorrel hair and a pretty, petulant face. She leaned against the door frame with her arms folded and seemed inattentive to my spiel. I turned my virility up to max, but she kept looking down, a smile playing on her lips. Finally she drawled:

"Something you should know — my Doberman is eating your foot."

I glanced down and saw a large black-and-tan quadruped gnawing my shin, exposing the gleaming vanadium-alloy shaft of my tibia. The animal began tearing at my calf, snorting foamy puffs of synthetic flesh all over the doorstep. Apparently its first bite had severed my sensor conduit, which was why I'd felt nothing. But the locomotor circuit remained intact, and I was able to deliver a kick which sent the dog flying like a thrown mailbag. It landed on the front lawn with all four legs in the air — a death attitude common to these creatures.

The woman opened her mouth so wide I could look down her throat and see her cardiac sphincter. Shrill daggers of sound emerged from her mouth cavity. Doors flew open along the street...

I unclipped my pen from my breast pocket, pressed down the cap with my thumb, and sprayed her tonsils with a fine mist of narco gas. As her knees buckled; I caught her under the arms and carried her into the house, kicking the door shut with my foot.

By the time I'd exposed her mastoid cavity, somebody was hammering on the door. I jumped up and locked it, then ran back and pushed the happiness capsule into her brain. I tapped the skull fragment in place and was gluing down the skin flap when I heard a shrill mechanical yelping outside. I ran to the window and saw a four-wheeled vehicle stop at the curb. A whirling dome on its top sprayed shards of amber light. Two men in blue suits with shiny metal on their chests started up the sidewalk.

I rushed back to the woman, revived her, and walked her to the door. I hid behind a drapery as the door shuddered under heavy pounding. The woman opened it and smiled.

"Are you all right?" asked the policeman.

"I'm fine. Wonderful."

He frowned and pulled at his lower lip. "Did you know there's a dead dog in your front yard?"

"Oh, could you remove it please?"

"You'll have to call the sanita-

tion department for that, lady."

"Thank you, I will. It was wonderful of you to come by."

She closed the door and leaned back against it, hugging herself. "I feel so *good*." She tilted her head and looked at me. "Are you some kind of robot?"

I had not been programmed to lie — a serious oversight, as I realized when I heard myself say:

"I'm what you call an android. First experimental contact type. Assigned to infiltrate the dominant life form on this planet. You *are* the dominant life form?"

"I don't really keep track of those things. You'll have to ask my husband."

"I'm not equipped to deal with husbands."

"I see." Her eyes dropped. "But you are ... equipped."

She referred to one of the side effects of the virility projector — the fact that it produced an erection. During the encounter with the dog I'd forgotten to turn it off. Now I remedied the oversight and started toward the back door.

"Wait." She pointed at my flapping pants leg. "You can't walk around in public with your foot half eaten."

"Of course I can." I demonstrated by pacing in a small circle. The partially severed foot flopped, but the end of the shaft supported my weight.

"People will notice," said the woman. "Crowds will gather. You won't be able to infiltrate properly."

"Oh, well, in that case ..." I sat down on the floor, unbuttoned my shirt, and twisted the button which corresponded to the human navel. A panel swung open on graphite-oiled hinges. I reached into the tool cavity and took out a welding torch and several strips of vanadium alloy. I welded the strips to my tibia, then sprayed on tissue until the calf and ankle looked like new.

"The problem is still the pants," she said as I stood up.

"True. But I have no facilities for mending fabric."

"I have a sewing machine," she said, her eyes pinching up at the corners. "If you don't mind taking off your pants."

I removed my trousers and held them out to her. She looked at my exposed lower half with a crestfallen expression. "What happened to the ... you know."

"I turned it off."

"Just like that?"

"It's only a by-product."

"Could you ... turn it on again?"

I reached into my armpit and

"OH, GOD!"

I turned it off.

"Turn it on again."

"No, really, we're wasting time."

"AGAIN!"

"I really must be going. Just give back my pants as they are."

She took a tottering step and clutched my collar. "You can't leave me like this. What kind of a man are you?"

"I'm an android, assigned to infiltrate the dominant —"

"Turn yourself on," she said in a hoarse voice. "Or your infiltration is kaput. You grasp my meaning, android X-thirteen?"

"Your designation is incorrect. I have no number, being a prototype."

"To hell with that. What I'm going to do is count ten, then run out into the street screaming. One ... two ..."

Another garbled directive bounced up on my retina: WHEN THREATENED WITH EXPOSURE, STEPS SHOULD BE TAKEN TO PRSP THE NTXIVBW WITHOUT HARMING THE ORGANISM ...

Whatever that meant. I solved the dilemma by turning on my virility projector and allowing the woman to take the initiative. She had a fecund imagination, coupled with a whimsical desire to make use of every room in the house. We were both on the kitchen table when her husband came home for lunch. He took a ballistics revolver from a drawer and blew three holes in my stomach as I ran out the back door without my trousers. This produced no pain in my synthoflesh, but it smashed most of the instruments in my intestinal repair cavity.

I tottered as I walked, my blazer was riddled, and I had no pants. Had I been human, I might have fled to my escape capsule hidden in the hills above the suburb. But I was android, and I'd been programmed to implant fifty happiness capsules.

The clothing problem was easily solved. I climbed through an open window and found a closet containing several suits. I selected a navy pin stripe and a green silk necktie. I was standing before a mirror knotting the tie when the door was kicked open. A woman stood there pointing a snub-nosed revolver at me.

"Don't move! Reach for the ceiling!"

"It is physically impossible to act while remaining motionless. Which order shall I obey?"

"Whichever you think will help you live the longest."

I turned my eyeballs and studied her image in the mirror. Her head was covered by short metal cylinders wrapped in red-brown hair. A plaid bathrobe was belted at her waist, loosely enough to reveal the hemispheres rising from her upper chest. I recalled how vulnerable these creatures

were to my virility projector.

I moved my hand only an inch toward my armpit before her revolver made a loud click.

"In about one second I'll put a bullet through your guts — unless you can give me a reason not to."

"It might hit the atomic reactor buried in my pelvic cavity. The resultant explosion would destroy the city. Is that reason enough?"

She tilted her head and squinted her eyes. "What are you, an escaped nut?"

"I'm an experimental contact android, assigned to infiltrate the dominant life form on this planet."

"You sound like an escaped nut. Stand still while I fan you."

She patted me under the arms and then squatted to run her hands up under my trouser cuffs. While she was doing that, I managed to turn on the virility projector. She went on patting my trousers, bunching the fabric in her hands, talking ...

"It might not surprise you to learn that I'm a policewoman. Too bad you chose to burgle the place during my day off. I —"

She stopped as she reached my groin. After a few seconds she rose until her face was only inches from mine.

"I thought you were carrying a piece." She gave a self-conscious laugh; then her mouth melted into a damp softness. "I guess you are ... *really*, aren't you?"

It wasn't even necessary to use my sales pitch. While we were in bed, I doused her with narco gas, implanted the happiness capsule, and got back into position before reviving her. She failed to notice a break in the rhythm.

Afterward she sat on the edge of her bed while I put on my clothes.

"Where'd you say you're from?"

"Arcturus," I said, buttoning my shirt.

She crossed her legs and lit a cigarette. "Are there any more at home like you?"

"No madame. I'm a prototype."

"Does that mean anything in English?"

"Simply that I'm an experimental model currently undergoing a field test. Before the model is put into mass production, my deficiencies will be corrected."

She got up and started toying with my necktie, standing so close I had to lift my chin above her head. "I couldn't see you had any deficiencies," she said.

"One in particular. Truthfulness. Another is that I can't say no."

An odd softness — not entirely of sympathy — came into her voice. "You must get tired, darling."

"Never. My atomic reactor will keep me energized for the next fifty years. It's just that all this..." I

nodded toward the bed, "delays my work. I have forty-seven more eggs to implant."

She laid her head on my shoulder. "I've got room for a few more."

"I think you misunderstand. I refer to the dominance mechanisms."

"Is that what they are?" Her breath was hot on my neck, her voice sounded taut and remote.

"Yes. Except that I don't have the master control. Androids aren't permitted them."

"You do fine with what they gave you, dear." She slid her hands up under my shirt. "Are androids ticklish?" Her fingers stabbed my ribs, rishing higher and higher until ... "Aha!" She found my virility button.

This led to another delay.

Afterwards, I hit nine homes in a row without finding anyone in. That struck me as odd.

At the tenth house a blonde opened the door. She threw back her housecoat and revealed a plump naked body.

"Let's skip the lobotomy and get right into happiness, okay?"

I took a step backward. "You heard about me?"

"Are you kidding? Get inside, before the mob ... oh-oh, too late."

Two dozen women had bunched up at the end of the street. I barely recognized the policewoman, she looked so grim in her uniform. Grimmer still was the double-barreled shotgun she cradled in her arms.

The blonde grabbed my hand and jerked me inside. She slammed the door and pressed her back against it. "You know what they plan to do to you, you poor innocent booby?"

"No. But I should warn you that sympathy is wasted on an android."

She snorted. "I could say that about a lot of men I know. Come in here."

It was, as I expected, a bedroom. But the rear window caught my eye. It opened onto a steep grassy hillside spotted with limestone outcroppings. Near the top of the slope, hidden inside a fake hollow boulder, sat my escape capsule. I could reach it in five minutes, get in and fly back to Arcturus ...

Without laying all my eggs? Yes. The implanting command was no longer operative. It had been superseded by another directive:

> IN CASE OF SERIOUS DANGER TO THE PROTO TYPE, SUSPEND OPERATION AND REMOVE ALL ITEMS OF NONEXPENDABLE MATERIAL. IT IS WELL AT THIS POINT TO REFLECT UPON THE VANITY OF CONQUEST AND TO

SEEK THE PEACE OF SOLITUDE.

The orders seemed clear enough. I threw open the window and stuck out my leg.

"Aren't you being just a little unfair?"

The blonde lay on the bed, in a pose I'd grown accustomed to. "I've been ordered back to Arcturus. Sorry. Maybe next time."

I vaulted the sill and hit the turf at a run. The women had surrounded the house, but they'd left wide gaps in their ranks. I lowered my head and charged toward a stocky redhead wearing a polka-dot jersey and black tights. She leaped to one side, and I burst into the clear and pounded up the slope.

Somebody shouted: "Aim low, Gertrude!"

There was a loud, hollow boom. Something smashed against my legs and knocked them out from under me. I struggled to get up, but my feet flopped. Tendons, locomotor nerves, receptors...all had been blown to tattered fluffs of synthoflesh.

Two women seized my arms, two others lifted my shattered legs. I could have broken free and crushed their skulls, but my inhibition against aggressive violence held firm.

They carried me through several back yards and down into a dank basement. A dozen pairs of hands strapped me to an exercise board. Efficient fingers peeled off my jacket, tie, pants and shirt. The policewoman leaned over me, smiled and pinched my cheek, then turned up my virility projector.

"Ooooh!"

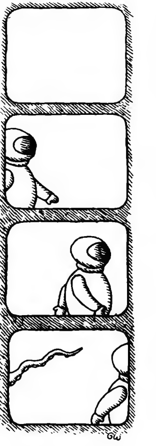
The basement was full of women. Most of them I'd never seen before. A freckled brunette came forward pulling off her short dress.

"I think Arcturans are just the *best* invaders ..."

Ten days later they turned up my virility dial and broke it off. I could see it was going to be a long fifty years, even for an android.

BAIRD SEARLES

Films



GENESIS 3½ + ½

It's the dog days as this is being written, which means that there's nothing Sirius to be considered. The *Exorcist* spin-offs continue (including a hard core porny), and one of them, *Beyond the Door*, is reportedly breaking all records locally, but I have sworn off; despite its flaws, *The Exorcist* was a serious attempt at a contemporary handling of a classic supernatural/ horror theme. The spin-offs have simply used the easiest effects from its thesis (that absolute evil is disgusting), leaving in the disgusting parts without the thought behind them.

So I'm left with having to make something out of nothing. The nothing to hand is a TV "movie" shown for the first time during the summer amidst the torrent of reruns, and *that*, gentle reader, is about as nothing as you can get if you know anything about the ways of television programming.

The programming background of this piece, as a matter of fact, is more interesting than the movie itself and is indicative of what can happen to program ideas and concepts once they get thrown into the meat grinder of the networks.

Two or three years back, Gene Roddenberry produced a science fiction film-for-TV called *Genesis*

for which there were some hopes that it could serve as a take-off point for another series as successful as you know what. It concerned a cryogenics guinea pig (Alex Cord) who, due to one of those mishaps, wakes a century and a half later to discover a devastated world in which a group of good guys, bound into an organization called PAX (remember that name), were fighting to rebuild civilization against some bad guys (two-naveled mutants) who wanted to Take Over.

Genesis II wasn't half bad; it had a good dash of that good old pulp pizzazz, was well produced, and done with some imagination. However, as a series idea, one had doubts.

These were confirmed by part two, again a two-hour TV-film, perhaps initially conceived as a two-part kickoff for the series, a la the first two episodes of *Star Trek*. This was called *Planet Earth*, and was about our men from PAX, led by the awakened sleeper (now played by John Saxon), searching for more left-over cultures to recivilize and finding here a matriarchal one, an episode equally insulting to women's libbers *and* male chauvinist pigs, not to mention men's libbers and female chauvinist sows.

Now we get to this summer's manifestation, again a two-hour film, this one called *Strange New World*. In none of the listings was any connection made with the earlier two. The opening, in fact, gives us an entirely different set-up. Here are a team of astronauts in a space station lab experimenting with (you guessed it) cryogenic sleep; they get word that things are about to go Boom and that their loved ones have been gathered in one place to be hibernated, and they are ordered to lay themselves down to sleep, too. Waking 180 years later, they fly back to Earth in their handy dandy re-entry vehicle (which conveniently contains an armored land rover) to start traipsing around the devastated countryside in search of their families' last resting place.

Aha! Something begins to sound familiar. Not only has all the exposition above been told us with visuals containing no actors — just sets and effects — but when we finally get moving, not only is the leader of this crew John Saxon again, but they are searching for something called PAX.

And this one falls into two distinct parts — two *very* distinct parts, In the first they stumble upon a settlement of civilized scientific types (despite a tendency to wander around in draperies reminiscent of Isadora Duncan and whose institute resembles a set left over from a Maria Montez epic). It is called Eterna and the residents

have discovered the secret of eternal youth. But it seems that all they really need is our heros' blood, because theirs is running thin.

After all that is resolved (leaving all the Eternans dead), the revived three, still searching for PAX, find themselves in the remains of a large park crowded with the descendants of the animals from its zoo. They are guarded by a fanatical band of barbarian types who use as their Bible a left-over copy of the Fish and Game Laws. The three intruders are accused of Poaching ...need I go on?

Now this was obviously two episodes of the still unrealized series generated from from *Genesis II*, cleverly re-edited and given a different frame and passed off as an original movie. No wonder, with all this cutting, pasting, re-editing, series potential, pilots, left-over episodes, etc., so little on television is ever satisfying. This is particularly true of sf, whose vital ingredient is concept — unlikely concepts which the author's skill is to make believable. That's very hard to pull off with this kind of shuffling and redealing.

Things-to-come-dept....Logan's Run just finishing filming with Michael York. I remember it as a good novel, but the thesis — youth takes over, everyone over 30 obsolete — seems a bit dated now... Lin Carter's *Thongor* reportedly bought for film. Does the world really need a new cycle of *Hercules* epics?

Things-that-didn't-come-dept ....I badly wanted to see and review *The Land That Time Forgot*, being always interested in what the indefatigable Michael Moorcock is up to (he co-scripted) as well as being a Burroughs freak, but the damn thing never played my neck of the woods (New York City). Sorry...

A fine, scary story about a strange purchase at a country fair, a murder and the terrifying connection.

The Three of Tens

by C.L. GRANT

It was no more than a week past midsummer when I came home from playing and my mother said to me, Jaimie, how'd you like to go to the fair tonight? Well, I looked at her, wondering if something had gone wrong, but she seemed no worse or no better than she always did since dad died. Her hair, not yet gone grey, was pushing into a knob at the back of her head, and there was always little bits like feathers flying about in the breeze she made rushing from one place to another. She seemed no more tired than usual, though her hand was shaking a little when she lifted the kettle from the burner. So I looked around the kitchen thinking maybe she'd been down to the King's Arms and had carried home a pint or two. But there was nothing there, either.

"Jaimie," she said again, "don't you hear me, son? I said, do you want to go to the fair tonight?"

"Why Mum," I said, "do you have a caller coming?"

I grinned, taking away the bite of what I way saying, and she waved me a quick no while she poured the tea and laid out the scones.

"I just want you to get out of the house for a while. You've been staying in every night past supper, and it's not like you."

I shrugged and sat at the table. "I don't want to go," I said.

"And why not, if you don't mind me asking?"

I shrugged again and fiddled with my spoon. "I don't know. I just don't want to go, that's all."

"Michael down the road is going," she said. "You could stay by him if you're afraid, you know."

"I'm not afraid," I said, a bit angrier than I wanted. "And I am so big enough to cross the road, you know." Then I saw the tease in her eyes. "Ain't I been taking care of you this past year, then?"

She sat down opposite me and took my hand, patted it once when she saw I didn't go for that, and leaned back. She tucked at her hair, brown like mine only longer, and fluffed the dress around her front as if it was too tight. "You have indeed been doing that, Jaimie," she said, "and to look at you now, nobody'd think you haven't even seen a dozen winters."

"Well, what do you mean by that?"

"I mean, Jaimie, that your friends aren't your friends anymore. I never see your old chums coming round, and you're getting a hard look a child shouldn't have your age. You go to school, you come right back and change and go to Mr. Harrow's for the errands he has for you, then back to eat and straight on to bed." She shook her head and let it drop forward slowly like it was too heavy for her to hold up anymore. "It isn't like we need the money, what with your dad's pension, and it isn't what I want for you, Jaimie. And I know he wouldn't want it, either." She jerked her head in the direction of the picture on the wall next to the Queen's, and then she pushed a pound note to me, and when I didn't take it up straight away, she laid it in my palm and closed my fingers around it.

"Go," she said. "Stay until after dark and see the lights. Then come on back and tell me what they look like. Michael'll be by about half-past eight."

It was ended then, and whether I wanted to go or not, she had already made the decision and there was nothing I could do about it. She's funny that way, she is. And when I come to think about it, I decided I wouldn't mind spending a few pennies at that.

So, when Michael came around practically dragging that girl of his, I was dressed and scrubbed and ready. The girl — Charley, they called her because her stupid name was Charlene — takes my hand right off, and before I knew, it was hustling me between them to the fair.

In case you don't know the place, there's a roundabout directly past the town's center, and two roads coming off it have between them this big field of grass that stretches toward Windsor and climbs up a hill into a lot of trees. Off the road on the left is Egham, where I live, and off the road on the right that goes to Windsor is the Thames. Well, dead in the middle of this field was a large circle of caravans with their inside walls open for games of chance and things like that. There was a Big Wheel, some rides for kids littler even than me, and on the side of the circle with its back to the river was a wagon that was supposed to have

a scary Fun House. Only it wasn't scary. I went through twice, and I know. There was a lot of people, it being Saturday night and all, and as soon as Michael and Charley walk me into the place where all the colored lights were, they patted me on the head, said ta and made me promise to look for them once an hour to see that I was all right.

This didn't bother me, though, because they know I can pretty much take care of myself, and I didn't always care for the way Charley liked to mother me.

So I changed my quid for pennies in the gambling arcade and played a few of the machines and lost a bit, then did a ride on the bumper cars, which wasn't much fun because there was no one there I knew good enough to really bump into. I tried throwing some hoops around these blocks of wood to win a goldfish for my mother, threw a couple of darts at some balloons, and just was mucking about when, during my wandering, I saw this small wagon tucked in sort of by the side of the Wheel. There was this sort of old man sitting on a chair under a sign that said he could make me a ten if I wanted to pay.

"Hey, mister," I said to him. He looked up and smiled. He hadn't shaved in a while, and his eyes kind of looked like my dad's when he'd had one pint too many, but I didn't smell nothing in the air. So I took a step closer and asked him what a ten was and how much did it cost.

"Well, lad," he said, reaching into his hip pocket and pulling out a pipe what looked like it'd been dropped a hundred times from the top of Windsor Castle. "I'll tell you something you don't know," he said, "a ten is whatever you want it to be. You want it to be a special wee gift for your mum, then that's what it'll be. You want it to be something not so fine for the chappie what steals your lunch, then that's what it'd be, too."

He laughed, then, and I backed away a bit. I wasn't scared or nothing, you see, but when you get to be the man of the house at my age, you got to learn pretty quick who wants to do you out of a fiver and whose hand you'd better shake quick before he slips it into your pocket.

"That don't make sense what you said," I told him. "That's silly."

"No, it don't make sense," the old man admitted, sucking on that pipe and staring at the blue smoke coming out of the bowl. "And that's the gem of it, you see. It don't make sense, and that makes it better than some flippin' doll or a bag with a goldfish in it, don't it?"

I didn't really know what he was saying, but there was something about him that wouldn't let

me get away. It was then he waved me closer, and I realized we'd been near shouting all the time to be heard over the people laughing and shouting, and the music and the noise. So I moved right beside him, and he reaches into a sack by his feet and pulls out a big handful of little boxes no bigger than my thumb.

"Tens," he said. "They cost tenpence each," and he laughed, and I could see his yellow teeth and smell the dead leaf smell of his tobacco. I kind of gave a shudder, and he stares at me before holding up the boxes. "They're numbered, you see," he said, "one through twenty. The odd ones are for your enemies, the others for your friends."

I tried to look close, but he pulled them back just enough so I couldn't touch. For tenpence maybe I could get something nice for mum, I thought, and I was going to pick out number twelve when I looked into his face. He was still smiling, the old man was, but there was nothing behind it, and when I saw those eyes the color of the river at night, everything kind of went away and I just stood there. Then I got awfully hot, and I started to feel dizzy and sickly like I'd had too many sweets. I felt myself holding out a hand and saw him picking out the pennies before he grabbed my other hand and dropped a box into it.

"What do I do with it," I said, sounding like I was far away at the top of the hill.

"You'll think of something," he said, "and mind you be careful with it, brat." Suddenly the smile went away and he pushed at me with the end of his pipe. "Now go away, boy, and let someone else have a go."

"But —"

"Go on," he said, "before I have to call the manager."

I got mad and wanted to ask for my pennies back, but he kept staring at me all the time, and so I quick turned away and went to look for Michael and Charley. I didn't feel so big anymore, and I wanted Charley to take my hand for a bit. The lights, the noise of the rides, the people's faces all twisted and funny — the fair wasn't much fun anymore. When I finally found them at the shooting gallery, I asked Charley to take me across the road to the river, and she did it without asking why because that's the way she is. We walked alohg the bank past where they mow the grass for people to sit and watch the pleasure boats go by, and then I stepped into the weeds a little ways and threw the box into the water.

It wasn't heavy at all, but it sank right away.

"Now why'd you go and do that?" she said as we walked back to the fair.

I shrugged. "It weren't worth nothing," I said.

"Where'd you get it, Jaimie?"

"Over there," I said, pointing when we reached the Wheel. But when she asked again and I looked, the old man was gone and the sign was away, too. Even his small wagon.

"I think you've been taken, Jaimie m'boy," she laughed, and I felt bad at that for a minute, but then she grabbed me under the arms and lifted me over her head. "You'll not get down until you give me a kiss." she said, and when I stuck out my tongue at her, she laughed again.

"Hey," Michael said, coming up behind us while I was pretending to hit Charley after she let me down, "do you mind if I hit her a few myself, or is this a private party?"

"Jaimie got taken," said Charley, dodging around him to get away from me.

"Who?" Michael said, suddenly very mad and kneeling down to look at me straight on.

"I don't want no trouble," I said. "I shouldn't have done it, but he looked at me funny, and it was only tenpence —"

"I don't care if it was a hundred pounds Jaimie," he said. "You got taken and that wasn't right."

I looked at him, saw his black eyes frowning, and grinned; I think that if I had any friends left in the world, Charley and Michael would be all of them.

"He was over by the Wheel," I said, "sitting by a wagon. There was a sign, too, but they're all gone now."

He put a hand on my shoulder, and we moved over and could find nothing but the smoking leftovers of the pipe tobacco in the grass. "He was right here," I said, looking around. "He was —"

Suddenly there was a scream, louder than the ones from the dumb girls on the Wheel, one that made the ones close to it turn around and look.

It was getting dark outside the caravan's circle, and the lights in the middle made it so bright that nobody could give a good account later of what they saw. But there was this man, this ... something standing just in the shadow of the Fun House wagon, getting up from a bundle lying on the ground. Charley told me not to look and pushed me behind her, but I had already seen that the bundle was a lady and her face was all red and shining, and you couldn't see her eyes or her mouth for all the red.

Then the man-thing ran away across the field toward the hill, and it was a long time before anyone got enough nerve to follow him or call the police.

Of course, Charley took me

home straight away and dragged my mother into the kitchen, but she was so excited and crying and looking at the back door that mum calls me in, knowing I was hiding in the hall listening.

"Tell me, Jaimie," she said.

So I told her.

She gave us a kind of funny look and said, "What did he look like?"

"Big," I said, "tall as a house he was. He had a black thing on, like a greatcoat, but it was all wet. And, and his face was all ... bones ... and ..."

And before I could help it, I was crying worse than Charley with shivers that wouldn't quit even when mum held onto me.

I didn't sleep well that night.

I kept seeing that face.

It had no eyes.

Well, the next day my aunt and uncle took us to Windsor Great Park to see the polo matches, and everyone there was talking about the excitment at the fair, and when we got home we saw in the papers all the stories about the murder. The police finally came after we'd left, and they chased after the guy, but they never caught him. They lost him, it said, in the forest park at the top of the hill. The funny thing was, a lot of people must have seen him, like me, but in all them papers there weren't no pictures at all. Not the camera kind, but the kind like they have them artists draw. All they said was: a man of unusual description.

Two days later, over in Englefield Green, a pharmacy was broken into and the two people living upstairs were killed. The papers said their faces were smashed.

The fair was still on, but hardly anyone went. Even my mother decided she didn't want to go, even when I told her I had a good time.

Since we was into the summer holiday, I didn't have to go to school. So when I wasn't running errands for Mr. Harrow's shop, I spent a lot of time in the small front yard helping my mother with our roses, which were the largest ones on the whole street. The neighbors were always coming over and asking me how I do them so well. Then, all they talked about was the killer. My nights hadn't been all that good since that day. So when they started into talking like that, I always left. But one day Michael came around and told us that the killer had murdered a whole family, parents and two kids, on the other side of town. Egham being the size it is, that wasn't too far away. He said they weren't going to put it in the papers anymore because of the terrible things done to the people and the police didn't want to scare anyone. But he knew a chum in the station who told him everything that was happening.

I started to ask Michael some questions about it, but my mother all of a sudden got mad and sent me inside to put on the kettle. She always did that when she didn't want me to hear anything bad.

It rained that night, and I could hear the police sirens just a couple of blocks away, down by the train station.

I kept having those dreams about the box.

That face.

One night I told Mum I had to go out for a quick errand for Mr. Harrow, but instead I ran over to the fair. There was maybe ten people there, not counting the hawkers, but when I asked a couple of the workers where the man with the wagon was, they only shoved me away and told me I was too little to be out so late. I could see they was getting ready to pack it in, but then one man said I was too young to drink, that there wasn't any old man like I said, and there never had been.

"Then what about the box I bought," I said, grabbing at his coat before he could walk away like all the rest.

"What box?"

"The one I bought from him," I said. "For tenpence."

"Oh? Well," he said with his face telling me he thought it was all a joke, "well, where is it?"

"I threw it in the river," I said.

"Oh, well, then," he said, patting me on the head like I was a little boy. "It'll come back to you, then. Anything you drop in there always comes back. Didn't you know that?"

I ran all the way home.

When I finally got to my block, I started to walk, trying to keep my face from getting all red, otherwise mum would think I'd been up to doing wrong. All the houses were close together, you know, with two families in a house side by side, and unless you knew the numbers or the colors of the shutters or something, you really couldn't tell one place from another.

But when I turned into our gate, I saw the box.

It was sitting in the middle of the walk. There was a puddle of water around it. I looked at the roses, but they were dry. So was the little bit of grass we had.

I looked up at the house, then across the hedge to Mrs. Daniels' yard. Then I kind of snuck up on it, feeling my heart getting ready to break through my shirt and my fingertips getting all tingly. It wasn't hot that night — there were clouds and all — but a drop of sweat stung my eye, and I jerked my head to clear it away. I moved another inch and stuck out my foot to tip the box over. The number three was still on one side, but the bottom had been ripped off. I

kneeled down so I could look inside, but it was just at sunset and I couldn't see anything very well.

And when something tapped my shoulder, I let out a horrid yell and fell over the box, felt it under me and rolled away, trying to crawl to the front door before that man-thing could get at me. But these hands grabbed me and pulled me to my feet, and I started punching and screaming until I opened my eyes and saw Michael ducking away from my fists.

"Hey, come on, come on." he said. "Settle yourself, Jaimie, it's only me, it's only me."

I got mad at him then, just as mum came running outside to see what all the noise was about.

"Why'd you go and scare me like that," I said, puffing like I'd just run in from London. "I could have done you harm, Michael."

He looked at me dead serious and nodded before turning to my mother, who was demanding that someone please say something she could understand. "Sorry," he said, "I guess I spooked him a little."

"Well," she said, wiping her hands on her apron, "you come in for a cuppa. The state he's in, I'm not going to spend the rest of the night alone with this vicious devil. And bring Charley with you."

I poked my head around Michael's waist, and there she was, leaning against the front hedge trying not to laugh at me. I frowned and poked a fist at her. She poked one back and came through the gate.

"You're out to kill my man," she said, cuffing the side of my head.

"No such thing," I said, pushing her away.

"Inside, all of you," mum said, and we were pushed into the kitchen before she really got mad. And we attacked some scones until I remembered the box and Michael said something about the fair closing down because no one was going. So I told mum what had happened outside, and Michael got up right away and went to the front, and I could hear him on the stoop before he suddenly slammed the door and came back in. His face was more white even than mine, and he told mum real quietly to bolt the latch and check all the windows. Charley he sent upstairs to do the same, and he waved for me to follow him into the parlor where he picked up the telephone and dialed 999.

"Michael, what's happening?" I must have sounded scared because he put an arm around me and pulled me close while he told the policeman who answered the emergency number that there was a prowler around our house and would he hurry and send a man round to check it. There was a

mumbling I couldn't hear, and Michael nodded and rang off.

"Jaimie," he said, "I want you to go into the kitchen and turn off all the lights. You don't stop for anything. You come right on back."

"Michael?"

"It's all right, son," he said, and for the first time I didn't mind him calling me that even though he'd just started going to university himself. I did what he said as fast as I could, grabbed a tin of biscuits from the cupboard and ran back. Charley and my mother were sitting on the sofa when I came in. And even though it was still summer, someone had lit a small fire. I didn't say anything; I was cold, too. The curtains were drawn tight over the windows, and the only light other than the fire was the small lamp in the corner.

"We'll just have to wait now, for the police," Michael said, "and I'll show them that box." He was standing in the middle of the room, his hands behind his back, kind of rocking on his heels like he was a mate on a ship. On the mantel over the fireplace I could see the box. It still looked wet.

Suddenly there was a smashing of glass, and mum says, "That's Mrs. Daniels."

Michael ran to the window and pulled back the curtain a little, but he said he couldn't see anything. But we could hear enough. There was a thumping, and one long scream that made me drop to the floor. We could hear plates breaking against the wall, and then something heavy, and it sounded like that whole half of the building was going to come down on Mrs. Daniels' head. There was another scream that Charley made, quietly, and then there was nothing.

Michael licked his lips and pointed me to stand by the fireplace. Charley and mum were holding onto each other tight, and Charley looked like a little girl and mum like she was a hundred years gone. I could see there were tears on her face, too. I watched while Michael picked up the poker and held it like a bat, but I could see he was almightly scared, and that made me scared, too, because if Michael couldn't do anything to help us, who could?

"Who is that man," Charley said, stuttering so bad I couldn't understand all her words.

Michael shrugged, but I said that I knew and told them what the man at the fair had told me about the box, and the river. He gave it and me a look, and mum said that it was nonsense and only the Gaels believed in things like that, but I could see she was just talking because she couldn't take her eyes off the mantel.

Now, I know there's a real lot of

things that can happen whether you believe them or not, and if that box had something in it that could make the river give up one of its dead, then I didn't see how we were going to get away from it. But I didn't say all that out loud because I was scared enough, and I didn't want to make mum feel worse.

Then we heard the window in the back door smash onto the floor.

"It's your box, Jaimie, your box!" Charley shouted and jumped to her feet and pressed herself against the wall.

"No!"

Another smash, and the door slammed back against the stove, and there was the rattle of the soup pot falling onto the floor.

And wet noises. Like someone walking in out of the rain.

Michael turned out the lamp and whispered to the women to get behind the sofa. All there was when I got used to it was the light from the fireplace; I was on one side, and Michael was on the other.

Wet noises, dragging. And it came around the corner.

Charley and mum whimpering behind the sofa.

The light was moving from the fire, shining off the thing's coat that was dripping water. I could hear it. Nothing else.

All I could see was its hands and its face. The hands had no skin, the fingers sharpened from years of scraping along the riverbed; they were huge and clung to with lots of little things like pointed scales. It held them up and took a step into the room.

Its face. Bones. Hanging green-black things. Grey, like the belly of a dead fish in the market. And nothing, nothing at all where the eyes should have been.

Michael made a noise and the thing moved to him, quicker now. It reached out and Michael swung with the pokèr, hitting it near the elbow and making it lean back. Then it came at him again, like I wasn't even there, and Michael aimed for its head, but he missed and it grabbed him like they were going to wrestle. Its hand came up and Michael started screaming, and the women started screaming, and there was a pounding on the front door, and all I could hear was Charley shouting how it was my box, my box. I started shaking all over, and Michael and the man-thing bumped into a table, knocking it over with a lamp and a candy dish. I started looking around for something to throw, anything at all, when I remembered the mantel; and I stretched up and grabbed around until I found the box.

The thing was making noises and Michael was still screaming. I didn't like the sound of a man screaming, and I crushed the box

under my foot and threw it into the fire. Then I don't know what happened to me, but I started shouting terrible things and ran to try to jump on its back, and suddenly there was this awful smell and the fire went bright for a second, so bright I could see the blood splashed on the wall, all over the thing's coat.

Then everything stopped.

The river-thing let go of Michael, who dropped back a step and fell onto his back, and his face was cut so much I couldn't look. And then it turned around to me, and I ran into the hall just as the door broke in and policemen started pouring into the house. They stopped, though, when they saw the thing standing there, but before one of them could use his gun, the coat folds like it was over nothing but air. The next thing I knew there was a pile of coat at my feet running out water and everyone talking all at once. I tried to get to Michael, but then all the lights went out, and the next thing I saw way myself in a hospital bed and a nurse bringing in mum and Charley, and they were carrying all kinds of sweets.

Charley leaned over me and kissed me hard and said, "My second hero."

"I didn't do anything," I said. "How's Michael?"

Her smile went away, but she said he was going to be all right except they would have to do a lot of work on his face before it could look good again. Not, she said, that it ever did. But it was a sad kind of laugh she gave me, then, and I could see the crying in back of her eyes.

"Hey, Mum," I said when she bent over to take my hands and kiss me. "What am I doing here? I'm all right, honest."

"You are that," she said. "The doctors say it's for observation."

"What's that mean?"

"It means they want to be sure you're all right. You've had yourself quite a shock for a little boy, Jaimie."

"Well, what about —"

"The police took what was left away."

"Will I get my picture in the papers?"

"No, Jaimie. They're saying they shot the man while he was escaping capture. No pictures. No one would believe it."

"It was the box, Mum," I said.

"I know, dear."

"Something in the box, Mum. It got into the water and —"

"I know, dear. Don't tax yourself."

"The ashes! Charley you got to be sure she throws out the ashes. Bury them. Get metal, a tin or something, and bury it in the yard. You got to do it, Mum. Charley,

you got to see she does it."

I guess I was getting kind of loud because mum put her hand on my lips gently and nodded.

"I'm way ahead of you, Jaimie. It's done, don't worry. Not exactly like you said, but done just the same."

"Mum, what did you do?"

"I shoveled it all in a sack and flushed it. Nothing to fear, Jaimie. All the ashes are down in the sewers, stretched from here to London, most likely."

She winked. Charley smiled. Then the nurse came and said they had to leave, and I was left alone in the ward. Thinking about what my mother had done.

So, if you come to visit, if you come to find my house, knock loud and call out your name. But don't be surprised if nobody's home.

Anywhere.

Pamela Sargent, whose most recent book is *Women of Wonder* (Vintage), returns with a story about a lonely sixteen-year old and a surprising discovery.

Exile

by PAMELA SARGENT

Diane Lundberg wasn't hungry. but she was trying hard to finish the food on her plate. She glanced across the table at her mother, then began to hide peas under chicken bones with her fork.

"We could use you at the store this Saturday, Diane," Mrs. Lundberg said, looking at her daughter.

"Uh, I have to do this research project for botany," muttered Diane. She looked away from her mother's face and down at the tablecloth. At sixteen, Diane Lundberg was a bony tall girl with her mother's dark hair and vivid coloring and her father's grey eyes. She slouched habitually, feeling awkward at her height.

"You have two *months* for that project," Mrs. Lundberg said. Her brown eyes showed annoyance.

"I don't want to leave it till the last minute," Diane replied, and looked toward her father.

"It's all right, Diane," Mr. Lundberg said. "I think we can manage without your helping hands."

Diane sighed to herself with mingled relief and guilt. The last time she had tried to help at the store, Mrs. Lundberg had assigned her to the junior clothes department. It was a friendly department, with two salesgirls who were slightly older than Diane, and two older saleswomen. They had shown Diane the stock and told her to ask for help if she needed it. Diane had been nervous around the self-assured, stylish salespeople and more nervous still about approaching the customers, most of whom were young women or girls. Diane felt awkward around them. While trying to show knit tops to three young girls, she had accidentally brushed against some boxes of sweaters with her arm. The sweaters spilled across the counter

and onto the floor. The girls had giggled, and Diane had felt her cheeks burning as she tried to pick up the sweaters and put them back in their boxes. After that, she had taken to lurking behind the counter, waiting for the customers to come to her or for one of the other salesgirls to handle them.

"I would have *thought*," said Mrs. Lundberg, apparently unwilling to drop the subject, "that you could have used the extra money." Mrs. Lundberg looked at Diane's plate. "And you *could* at least *try* to finish your supper, you're too thin as it is."

Diane hunched over and crossed her arms over her small breasts. Her stomach felt knotted. She stared at her plate, silently refusing to eat any more.

"She ate two candy bars this afternoon," Danny Lundberg said. Diane's brother was ten, a small wiry boy with thick blond hair. She glared at him, then tried to kick him under the table, but missed. "I saw her," Danny went on, glaring back at Diane. "She ate two of the big bars."

"No wonder," said Mrs. Lundberg. "You're going to get *sick* with those eating habits."

"If you can stop squabbling," said Mr. Lundbert dispassionately, "I'd like to at least enjoy my dessert in peace." He ran a hand through his thinning grey hair.

"I have a right to be concerned, Eric," Mrs. Lundberg went on. "Diane's lost a least five pounds this month; you can tell just by looking at her."

"Please," said Diane. She unfolded her arms and flung them across the table. Her right arm hit her father's wineglass; the glass wobbled, then fell over, spilling its contents on the pale-blue tablecloth. Mr. Lundberg calmly picked up the glass, then blotted at the stain with his napkin.

"Why must you be so damned clumsy?" said Mrs. Lundberg angrily.

Diane stood up. Her throat was constricted, and she had to force words from her mouth. "Just leave me alone," she said softly. Then she turned and retreated from the table, through the living room to her bedroom where she closed the door.

Diane curled up on the bed in the darkness, miserable and alone.

Diane sat on the edge of her bed, staring out her window at the wooded area just beyond the yard in back of the house. The trees were shedding their leaves and would soon be stretching bony limbs toward the grey autumn sky.

Diane hated Morriston. They had moved from Minneapolis to Morriston in 1978, when she was twelve. Diane had felt shy in the

new school and ill at ease around the children who lived in the planned community. Everything had been different in Minneapolis. She had friends there. In Morriston, the only real friend she had was Marya Chung, and even Marya didn't come over to Diane's house that often anymore.

Diane moved toward her phone, punched out Marya's number. The small screen above the phone flickered, and Marya's face appeared.

"Hey, Di, could you hold on a minute?" Marya's face vanished for a few seconds, then reappeared. "Look what I got for Bert." Marya held up a pair of pierced earrings with tiny gold M's dangling from the loops. "We went downtown this afternoon, so he could get his ears done, and they'll heal by his birthday. So this is his present, except he already knows what I got." Marya moved closer to her screen. "He got me these." Diane could barely see the small gold B's hanging in Marya's ears.

"Great," said Diane. "I just wanted to ask you if you wanted to work on that botany thing this Saturday."

"Can't, Bert and I'll be busy; besides, we've got *years* to work on that thing. You should call Chris Reiner, she always does everything early."

"I guess," said Diane. She always felt intimidated by Chris Reiner's cold intellectuality and air of superiority.

"Look, Di. I have to get off now, Bert's supposed to call." Marya's slanted eyes seemed to reveal impatience.

"Sure," said Diane.

"I'll call tomorrow," said Marya. The screen went blank.

Diane sat by the phone. She had no intention of calling Chris Reiner and putting up with her condescending attitude for a whole day. She got up and wandered over to her desk, sat down and opened her history book.

There was a soft knock at the door. "All right if I come in?" her father's voice asked.

"Yeah," said Diane. Mr. Lundberg entered the room and sat on the edge of the bed, stretching his long legs in front of him. Diane began to pout and stare at the floor.

"Your mother's not really mad, honey," said Mr. Lundberg. "She just gets worried, and it comes out sounding that way. I guess it's her Italian temperament."

Diane was silent.

"I keep telling her not to worry about you. When I was your age, they called me 'bone man,' and here I am with flab around my waist." Mr. Lundberg cleared his throat. Diane looked up from the floor.

"Hey, why don't you come with

us to the store this Saturday, and I'll take you out to lunch. Maybe I can sneak you a glass of wine under the table."

Diane tried to smile.

"Besides," Mr. Lundberg went on, "I want you to earn enough for a new dress. I want my girl to be the prettiest one at that big school party in October."

"I'm not going to the party," said Diane. "I don't have anybody to go with."

"Well, that doesn't matter, plenty of kids go without somebody and meet people there. Why, I bet the boys are more nervous than you girls, I remember..."

"I'm not going to go and just stand around." Diane felt her cheeks growing pink. "I'm not going to stare at my feet all night and come home crying. I have better things to do, and I'm not going to the store and have people laughing at me because I'm clumsy."

"Nobody laughs at you there, honey, why do you think they do?"

"They *do*," said Diane. "Don't you think I can tell?"

Mr. Lundberg sighed. "Diane," he went on, "you build a wall around yourself and hide behind it; you don't let anyone through, and yet, you're disappointed when, in spite of that, no one manages to break it down." He stood up and shook his long legs. "My foot's asleep." he muttered almost apologetically while stomping on it. For a second, he looked like an awkward boy, betrayed only by his grey hair and a slight bulge at the waist. "Well, I guess you're old enough to make up your own mind," he said, "but if you change it, my offer for lunch is still open." Mr Lundberg ambled out of the room, slouching slightly, and closed the door.

Diane, clutching her buried misery, returned to her history book.

When Diane got up on Saturday, her parents had already left for Minneapolis and the store. Most of the people in Morriston worked in the businesses around which the community had been built. They commuted to their jobs by walking or riding bicycles along the curved, winding roads of Morriston and rarely used their cars even to go into Minneapolis, as the monorail would take them there is less than an hour.

Diane drank a glass of orange juice in the kitchen while her brother Danny watched cartoons in the playroom. She wandered into the playroom and sat down.

"Are you going out later?" she asked.

"I'm going to Sam's house for lunch, and we're gonna play football this afternoon."

"Have you got your keys?"

Danny sighed with exasperation. "Yeah, I got my damn keys." He gestured at the gold chain around his neck. "See?"

"Well, I'm going out, so don't forget to lock the doors. I'll check the windows before I leave."

"I won't forget," said Danny, grimacing.

"You did last week; if I hadn't come back early, mom and dad would've given you hell."

"I won't forget," Danny said again.

Diane got up and went to get her coat. She went through the house quickly, checking the windows. There had been more burglaries recently; it was not difficult for someone to get on the monorail at Duluth or Minneapolis and come out to a place like Morriston, hit a few houses or apartments and be on the next train out.

Diane went outside and down to the road that curved past the house. The Lundberg home stood on a small hill with two other houses and a group of apartments. Large evergreens stood near the buildings, and there were some small bushes near the road. Diane stopped at the mailbox by the road. There was only one letter, from Grandmother Tortonelli. Diane held it up and shook it to see if there was money for her and Danny. Diane's grandmother didn't believe in checking accounts or credit cards and insisted on sending cash through the mails. There was nothing in the letter. Probably just complaining about her gall bladder again, thought Diane, and put the letter back in the box for Danny to take inside.

Diane walked down the road to a small path leading into the woods. Morriston was surrounded on three sides by a large forest, and when it was being built, the developers had decided to leave most of the wooded area alone. A couple of years ago, there had been talk of building more homes in the forest itself, but that had been resolved by some of the wealthier Morriston residents buying back the wooded land from the developers. The forest was safe, at least for now.

Diane headed into the forest, clutching her botany notebook. She kept on the path for a while, until she heard voices ahead. A boy and girl emerged from the woods and came toward Diane; she had seen them both around school but wasn't sure of their names.

The boy nodded and grinned at Diane. She nodded back, and slouched as she saw that both were somewhat shorter than herself. As they passed her and continued toward the road, Diane thought she heard the girl giggle.

Diane turned off the path and began to walk deeper into the forest. Leaves crackled under her feet as she moved past the trees and bushes. She walked until she reached a large rock in the center of a small clearing, where she stopped to rest.

Diane had been in the forest many times, but she had not been near this clearing before, or at least could not remember it. She glanced around, trying to orient herself. She looked at a large old oak and found herself wondering how old it was; its trunk was very wide. What must it have seen, Diane thought, how many new roots must it have grown under this ground. At last she got up and moved out of the clearing, in the direction, she thought, of the path leading back to Morriston.

After Diane had walked for a while, she saw that she had only been moving further into the forest. She looked up at the grey sky, looking for the sun. The path near her home would be to the southeast of the woods. She was not worried, it was difficult to get too lost. There was a small brook running through the forest somewhere to the north, and if one followed it downstream, it would lead to the end of the path back to her home. Going upstream, the brook led to the apartments near the shopping area of the community. It was a winding stream, and she was bound to run into it sooner or later.

Diane kept moving until she came to a hillside covered with brambly bushes. She looked at the hill and decided to at least try to climb it. If she got to the top, she could view more of the forest and could probably figure out where she was. Then she could get busy with her project.

She tucked her notebook into her belt, then began to make her way up the hillside. The bushes scratched at her jeans. Diane climbed over them and clutched at a few branches to keep from slipping. She came to a group of rocks and scurried over them, almost losing her balance at one point. Above the rocks were more bushes. She struggled through them and got to the top of the hill. Several tall evergreens stood there, surrounding a small clearing.

Diane stood near one of the trees and looked around. She could see the small brook winding through the woods, and she estimated that it was about two hundred feet from the bottom of the hill.

As long as I'm up here, I might as well look around, she thought. She made her way into the small clearing. A few small animals scurried from her through the leaves.

The clearing seemed strangely silent. Diane saw a large object standing in the center of the area. She removed her notebook from her belt and moved closer to it.

The object was a couple of feet taller then herself. From a distance, it resembled a large moss-covered rock, but viewed more closely, it looked like petrified wood. Several large branches were wound around its sides over the moss.

Diane sat in the leaves around the object. She felt her sadness uncoil from inside her stomach. Against her will, her loneliness settled around her, a veil shielding her from the forest.

I am alone. Startled, Diane looked around. She saw no one, yet the words had sounded near her ear.

I may be the last. No, not near her ear, but from inside her mind. Suddenly the forest vanished from before her eyes and she stared into a black void. She turned away quickly.

She saw the clearing again and the object next to her. But its branches had moved slightly and were no longer wound so tightly around the moss. Diane was a bit apprehensive, but not frightened. She watched as the branches unwound from around the moss and stretched toward the sky.

What are you, thought Diane, and before she could speak, the forest vanished once more. She saw green flatlands, short squat domes and a few caves in the distance. Above her, the sky was ablaze with light, but there was no sun.

My home. There is no darkness there, so close to the galaxy's center. The stars are closer together, millions crowded near each other. Diane could see no shadows, only bright colors, reddish domes against green grass, blue towers in the distance pointing toward the lighted sky. She felt the edges of a deep sorrow brushing against her mind, then a gentle plea: *Don't be afraid.*

How did you get here, she thought, and saw the blue towers leaving the green surface, one at a time, on wispy pink trails.

Why, she asked silently. The surface of the strange planet vanished and she was floating, staring at a bright sun which flared brilliantly and suddenly before her eyes. *Our sun was to flare, become a nova. Some remained, to live out their lives there. The rest of us scattered. We were to meet beyond the galactic hub, to decide...*

...where to go, finished Diane. She saw bright clusters of stars receding from her gaze, large blue and red ones, white dwarf stars, yellow and orange ones, colors bright against the blackness of space. She looked away from them and saw a group of the treelike

creatures, without moss covering their bodies. They stood near her, gently waving their limbs. Apprehension draped itself over her, then slid off her shoulders. *It was a long journey, I became old and young many times as we traveled, I cannot count how many.*

Diane was puzzled. *Two stand together, the minds mold, one is wiser, one is a child, free to learn again.* She shook her head.

Where are the others, she breathed almost silently, and grief struck her with its fist. The black void reappeared, blinding her with its darkness; *gone, gone before we reached the rim of your system, they had become old and young too many times, we bore no young, and there were no new minds to meet and refresh them, at last they stood silent in our ship.* Diane saw them, adrift on a vessel in the void, limbs wound loosely around their still bodies.

She blinked, and looked around the clearing. It had grown colder in the forest, and darker. Diane stood up stiffly, her muscles sore from sitting. One of her feet was asleep, and she stomped on it. "I must go home now." She spoke as she thought. The creature pulled in its limbs and would them until it looked as Diane had found it. She picked up her notebook and began to make her way out of the clearing.

Come back. The tendril of thought brushed lightly against her mind and was silent.

Diane came to the clearing on the hill the next Saturday, her mind a jumble of rage and sadness. She made her way up the hill too rapidly and slipped a couple of times, bruising her knee. Nagging at me, all the time giving me trouble, her mind shouted at the creature, my parents, everybody.

A thought nudged at her mind, and it was only with difficulty that Diane recognized it as the creature's gentle laughter. It caught her delicately, and at last her mind began to smile back.

Have you seen many of us, she asked silently. She saw the clearing, but a man was near her, covered with hides, blood-stained stone in his fist. *One, a murderer of a tribesman.* The dark angry man vanished, and she saw three Indian children dancing through the clearing under a summer sky. *Three, whose minds I could not touch.* The children faded, and she saw a small group of people, draped in feathers and skins, approach and lay down bundles of bright beads and hides. *Several, who worshiped me.* The group disappeared, and she saw an angry man, with cold blue eyes and ragged clothes, hurling stones into her face. *One, who cursed me and called me his madness when I*

reached out to him.

And then Diane saw herself, slouched against a tree trunk, knees under her chin. *One, who was lonely and called me friend.* The image of Diane faded.

She looked at the creature and saw it stretch its limbs to the sky. Impulsively, she reached out and grasped its limbs. My only friend, she thought.

A thought brushed against her, a gentle chiding. *With so many of your own kind? You cannot reach out to them?*

No, and she spoke it aloud, "No."

But I could not reach them either, their violent thoughts often frightened me, bubbling under the surface, or bursting forth like a flaring sun. And I could not reach the life here, dropping its seeds or bearing its young, reminding me of the child I cannot have. But you are my friend.

Yes, she replied.

I long to grow younger again, the creature thought, and leave my sorrow. Diane saw the dead ship, tired and old, at last stopping at the edge of the solar system, petrified bodies aboard. She felt herself moving slowly into the smaller ship, useful only for short distances. *I had to leave and find a home here. Be my child, help me to grow young again, to feel joy.*

Yes, she thought, reaching out to the creature. Suddenly she saw its strange world once again, its vivid colors hurting her eyes.

Shall I show you my home again, what was our world? Diane's grip tightened on the creature's limbs, and her mind was flooded with bright images, the violet rocks of the caves, red buildings, green and yellow plants nudging at her feet. Ideas flooded her mind, a complex code of behavior rooted in generosity and total honesty, a system of mathematics, theories of science, all passed into her, blurred, and combined in a larger system which encompassed them all. Diane clutched at the creature's limbs, her head burning.

Another wave of thought passed from its mind to hers, and she began to tremble. This time she saw the passionate youth of the creature, the rapid swings from delirium to despair, the carelessness and cruelty. She let go of the limbs and staggered away, stumbling against a tree. Images kept flooding her mind, changing so rapidly that she could not distinguish them.

"Stop," she cried, flinging her arms over her face, "stop." She saw a violet cave before her, tried to flee into it...

...and fell over the side of the hill, rolling down, bushes scratching her, until she was stopped halfway down by a large rock

jutting from the hill. She continued down the hill on foot, tripping now and then until she reached the bottom.

Diane was running through the forest and at last collapsed, her body unable to move further. The sky spun as she stared up at it. "Stop, stop," she screamed. Voices sounded in her mind. "Stop, stop." She saw two faces leaning over her, flung her hands up, and spun into a black void.

Diane walked unsteadily into the kitchen and sat down at the small table in the corner. Her mother turned from the stove.

"You look better today, dear," she said to Diane. "It must be that big breakfast I fixed you; you finished everything."

"I feel better," Diane said. "I thought maybe I'd take a little walk today."

"Well, I don't know," her mother said. "You've only been up and around for a couple of days, and that nice doctor at the hospital said you should take it easy for at least a few more days." Mrs. Lundberg paused. "But maybe it would be good for you, the fresh air." Mrs. Lundberg moved to Diane's side and put a hand on her shoulder. "Now listen, if you get tired, just stop somewhere and give me a call. I'll come get you."

"Sure," said Diane.

Mrs. Lundberg gave her a quick hug. "I'm glad you're better, honey."

When Diane left the house, she began to walk toward the path into the forest. As she moved along the path, she saw someone gathering leaves just ahead. The figure straightened, and Diane saw it was Chris Reiner.

Chris blushed as she murmured a greeting. Diane, looking at the girl's pudgy face, was surprised. I didn't know she blushed, she thought.

"I'm glad you're better," said Chris. "But you must be really behind in school. *I've* even been putting more time in." Chris' chin jutted out fiercely.

But Diane, for once, didn't feel intimidated by Chris. She gazed into the stocky girl's blue eyes and saw loneliness behind a wall of coldness. "You can believe it," said Diane. She began to walk past Chris, then turned. "Hey, do you want to come over tonight? We can do some work and maybe get a pizza later."

A slow smile appeared on Chris Reiner's face. "Yeah." Her face grew redder. "Sure, I'll be over after supper."

"See you then," said Diane. She moved on down the path, turned off it, and made her way toward the hill and the creature.

When she had climbed the hill,

she saw the creature standing as she had first found it, limbs wrapped about its mossy body. She approached it cautiously and reached out tentatively to its mind.

She saw only curiosity and a childlike joy. The creature's mind touched hers gently. *Do you like it here too? I think I know you. Were you here before?*

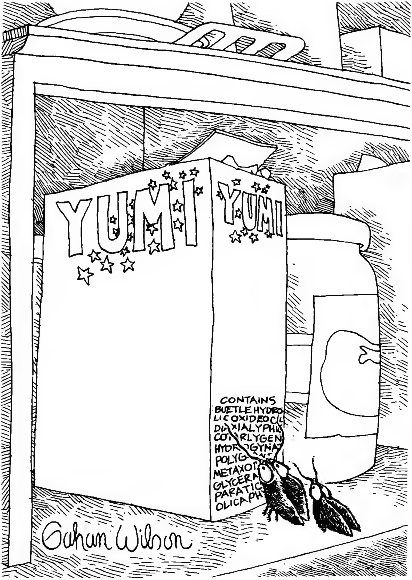
The creature had grown young again and was busily exploring the clearing with its senses. It had become the child that it wanted, and Diane was happy that she had reached out to its loneliness. Yes, I'll come back, thought Diane, but I must go now.

Will you come back?

Yes, soon. She tried to reach more deeply into its mind, but the creature had already lost interest in her. I'll be back, she thought, gazing at the alien child, but alone; it'll be our secret. She thought with sadness of the wise creature she had spoken with before and who no longer really existed in that strange body. I'll have to be a parent to it, she thought, guide it carefully. Diane turned to make her way down the hill.

And thank you, her mind said to the creature. She climbed down the hill and rested a bit at the bottom.

When she stood up again, she straightened her shoulders, older now, and walked back to Morriston.



"The hell with this stuff!"

Mr. Lumley offers a gripping and suspenseful story with some unusual ingredients. The story is set in northern Canada; the hero is an American meteorologist who ventures out into the snows to confront terrors both natural and supernatural.

Born of the Winds

by BRIAN LUMLEY

I

CONSIDER: I am, or was, a meteorologist of some note — a man whose interests and leanings have always been away from fantasy and the so-called "supernatural" — and yet now I believe in a wind that blows between the worlds, and in a Being which inhabits that wind, striding in feathery cirrus and shrieking lightning-storm alike across icy Arctic heavens.

Just how such an utter *contradiction* of beliefs could come about I will now attempt to explain, for I alone possess all of the facts. If I am wrong in what I more than suspect — if what has gone before has been nothing but a monstrous chain of coincidence confused by horrific hallucination — then with luck I might yet return out of this white wilderness to the sanity of the world I knew. But if I am right, and I fear that I am horribly right, then I am done for, and this manuscript will stand as my testimonial of an hitherto all-but-unrecognized plane of existence...and of its *inhabitant*, whose like may only be found in legends whose sources date back geological eons into Earth's dim and terrible infancy.

My involvement with this thing has come about all in the space of a few months, for it was just over two months ago, fairly early in August, that I first came to Navissa, Manitoba, on what was to have been a holiday of convalescence following a debilitating chest complaint.

Since meteorology serves me both as hobby and means of support, naturally I brought some of my "work" with me; not physically, for my books and instruments are many, but locked in my head were a score of little problems beloved of the meteorologist. I brought certain of my

notebooks, too, in which to make jottings or scribble observations on the almost Arctic conditions of the region as the mood might take me. Canada offers a wealth of interest to one whose life revolves about the weather: the wind and rain, the clouds, and the storms that seem to spring from them.

In Manitoba on a clear night, not only is the air sweet, fresh, sharp and conducive to the strengthening of weakened lungs, but the stars stare down in such crystal clarity that at times a man might try to pluck them out of the firmament. It is just such a night now — though the glass is far down, and I fear that soon it may snow — but warm as I am in myself before my stove, still my fingers feel the awesome cold of the night outside, for I have removed my gloves to write.

Navissa, until fairly recently, was nothing more than a trail camp, one of many to expand out of humble beginnings as a trading post into a full-blown town. Lying not far off the old Olassie Trail, Navissa is quite close to deserted, ill-fated Stillwater; but more of Stillwater later....

I stayed at the judge's house, a handsome brick affair with a raised log porch and chalet-style roof, one of Navissa's few truly modern buildings, standing on that side of the town toward the neighboring hills. Judge Andrews is a retired New Yorker of independent means, an old friend of my father, a widower whose habits in the later years of his life have inclined towards the reclusive; being self-sufficient, he bothers no one, and in turn he is left to his own devices. Something of a professional anthropologist all his life, the judge now studies the more obscure aspects of that science here in the thinly populated North. It was Judge Andrews himself, on learning of my recent illness, who so kindly invited me to spend this period of convalescence with him in Navissa, though by then I was already well on the way to recovery.

Not that his invitation gave me licence to intrude upon the judge's privacy. It did not. I would do with myself what I would, keeping out of his way as much as possible. Of course, no such arrangement was specified, but I was aware that this was the way the judge would want it.

I had free run of the house, including the old gentleman's library, and it was there one afternoon early in the final fortnight of my stay that I found the several works of Samuel R. Bridgeman, an English professor of anthropology whose mysterious death had occured only a few dozen miles or so north of Navissa.

Normally such a discovery would have meant little to me, but I had heard that certain of Bridgeman's theories had made him something of an outcast among others of his profession; there had been among his beliefs some which belonged in no way to the scientific. Knowing Judge Andrews to be a man who liked his facts straight on the line, undistorted by whim or fancy, I wondered what there could be in the eccentric Bridgeman's works that prompted him to display them upon his shelves.

In order to ask him this very question, I was on my way from the small library room to Judge Andrews' study when I saw, letting herself out of the house, a distinguished-looking though patently nervous woman whose age seemed rather difficult to gauge. Despite the trimness of her figure and the comparative youthfulness of her skin, her hair was quite grey. She had plainly been very attractive, perhaps even beautiful, in youth. She did not see me, or if she did glimpse me where I stood, then her agitated condition did not admit of it. I heard her car pull away.

In the doorway of the judge's study I formed my question concerning Bridgeman's books.

"Bridgeman?" the old man repeated me, glancing up sharply from where he sat at his desk.

"Just those books of his, in the library," I answered, entering the room proper. "I shouldn't have thought that there'd be much for you, Judge, in Bridgeman's work."

"Oh? I didn't know you were interested in anthropology, David?"

"Well, no, I'm not really. It's just that I remember hearing a thing or two about this Bridgeman, that's all."

"Are you sure that's all?"

"Eh? Why, certainly! Should there be more?"

"Hmm," he mused. "No, nothing much — coincidence. You see, the lady who left a few moments ago was Lucille Bridgeman, Sam's widow. She's staying at the Nelson."

"Sam?" I was immediately interested. "You knew him then?"

"I did, fairly intimately, though that was many years ago. More recently I've read his books. Did you know that he died quite close by here?"

I nodded. "Yes, in peculiar circumstances I gather?"

"That's so, yes." He frowned again, moving in his chair in what I took to be agitation.

I waited for a moment, and then when it appeared that the judge intended to say no more, I asked, "And now?"

"Hmm?" His eyes were far away even though they looked at me. They quickly focused. "Now

— nothing...and I'm rather busy!" He put on his spectacles and turned his attention to a book.

I grinned ruefully, inclined my head and nodded. Being fairly intimate with the old man's moods, I knew what his taciturn, rather abrupt dismissal had meant: "If you want to know more, then you must find out for yourself!" And what better way to discover more of this little mystery, at least initially, than to read Samuel R. Bridgeman's books? That way I should at least learn something of the man.

As I turned away, the judge called to me: "Oh, and David — I don't know what preconceptions you may have formed of Sam Bridgeman and his work, but as for myself...near the end of a lifetime, I'm no closer now than I was fifty years ago to being able to say what *is* and what *isn't*. At least Sam had the courage of his convictions!"

What was I to make of that? — and how to answer it? I simply nodded and went out of the room, leaving the Judge alone with his book and his thoughts....

That same afternoon found me again in the library, with a volume of Bridgeman's on my lap. There were three of his books in all, and I had discovered that they contained many references to Arctic and near-Arctic regions, to their peoples, their gods, superstitions and legends. Still pondering what little I knew of the English professor, these were the passages that primarily drew my attention: Bridgeman had written of these northern parts, and he had died here — mysteriously! No less mysterious, his widow was here now, twenty years after his demise, in a highly nervous if not actually distraught state. Moreover, that kindly old family friend Judge Andrews seemed singularly reticent with regard to the English anthropologist, and apparently the judge did not entirely disagree with Bridgeman's controversial theories.

But what were those theories? If my memory served me well, then they had to do with certain Indian and Eskimo legends concerning a god of the Arctic winds.

At first glance there seemed to be little in the professor's books to show more than a normally lively and entertaining anthropological and ethnic interest in such legends, though the author seemed to dwell at unnecessary length on Gaoh and Hotoru, air-elementals of the Iroquois and Pawnee respectively, and particularly upon Negafok, the Eskimo cold weather spirit. I could see that he was trying to tie such myths in with the little-known legend of the Wendigo, of which he seemed to deal far too positively.

"The Wendigo," Bridgeman wrote, "is the avatar of a Power

come down the ages from forgotten gulfs of immemorial lore; this great *Tornasuk* is none other than Ithaqua Himself, the Wind-Walker, and the very sight of Him means a freezing and inescapable death for the unfortunate observer. Lord Ithaqua, perhaps the very greatest of the mythical air-elementals, made war against the Elder Gods in the Beginning; for which ultimate treason He was banished to frozen Arctic and interplanetary heavens to 'Walk the Winds Forever' through fantastic cycles of time and to fill the *Esquimaux* with dread, eventually earning His terrified worship and His sacrifices. None but such worshippers may look upon Ithaqua — for others to see Him is certain death! He is as a dark outline against the sky, anthropomorphic, a manlike yet bestial silhouette, striding both in low icy mists and high stratocumulus, gazing down upon the affairs of men with carmine stars for eyes!"

Bridgeman's treatment of the more conventional mythological figures was less romantic; he remained solidly within the framework of accepted anthropology. For example:

"The Babylonian storm-god, Enlil, was designated 'Lord of the Winds.' Mischievous and mercurial in temperament, he was seen by the superstitious peoples of the land to walk in hurricanes and sand-devils..." Or, in yet more traditional legend: "Teuton mythology shows Thor as being the god of thunder; when thunder storms boiled and the heavens roared, people knew that what they heard was the sound of Thor's war-chariot clattering through the vaults of heaven."

Again, I could not help but find it more than noticeable that while the author here poked a sort of fun at these classical figures of mythology, he had *not* done so when he wrote of Ithaqua. Similarly, he was completely dry and matter-of-fact in his descriptive treatment of an illustration portraying the Hittite god-of-the-storm, Tha-thka, photographed from his carved representation upon a baked clay tablet excavated in the Toros Mountains of Turkey. More, he compared Tha-thka with Ithaqua of the Snows, declaring that he found parallels in the two deities other than the merely phonetical similarity of their names.

Ithaqua, he pointed out, had left webbed tracks in the Arctic snows tracks which the old *Esquimaux* tribes feared to cross; and Tha-thka (carved in a fashion very similar to the so-called "Amarna style" of Egypt, to mix ethnic art groups) was shown in the photograph as having star-shaped

eyes of a rare, dark carnelian...and webbed feet! Professor Bridgeman's argument for connection here seemed valid, even sound, yet I could see how such an argument might very well anger established anthropologists of "the Old School." How, for instance, might one equate a god of the ancient Hittites with a deity of comparatively modern Eskimos? Unless of course one was to remember that in a certain rather fanciful mythology Ithaqua had only been banished to the North following an abortive rebellion against the Elder Gods. Could it be that *before* that rebellion the Wind-Walker strode the high currents and tides of atmospheric air over Ur of the Chaldees and ancient Khem, perhaps even prior to those lands being named by their first inhabitants? Here I laughed at my own fancies, conjured by what the writer had written with such assumed authority, and yet my laughter was more than a trifle strained, for I found a certain cold logic in Bridgeman that made even his wildest statement seem merely a calm, studied exposition....

And there were, certainly, wild statements.

The slimmest of the three books was full of them, and I knew after reading only its first few pages that this must be the source of those flights of fancy which had caused Bridgeman's erstwhile colleagues to desert him. Yet without a doubt the book was by far the most interesting of the three, written almost in a fervor of mystical allusion with an abundance — a *plethora* — of obscure hints suggestive of half-discernible worlds of awe, wonder and horror bordering and occasionally impinging upon our very own.

I found myself completely enthralled. It seemed plain to me that behind all the hocus-pocus there was a great mystery here — one which, like an iceberg, showed only its tip — and I determined not to be satisfied with anything less than a complete verification of the facts concerning what I had started to think of as "the Bridgeman case." After all, I seemed to be ideally situated to conduct such an investigation: this was where the professor had died, the borderland of that region in which he had alleged at least one of his mythological beings to exist; and Judge Andrews, (provided I could get him to talk) must be something of an authority on the man; and, possibly my best line of research yet, Bridgeman's widow herself was here now in this very town.

Just why this determination to dabble should have so enthused me I still cannot say; unless it was the way that Tha-thka, which Being Bridgeman had equated with

Ithaqua, was shown upon the Toros Mountains tablet as walking splayfooted through a curious mixture of *cumulonimbus* and *nimbostratus* — cloud formations which invariably presage snow and violent thunderstorms! The ancient sculptor of that tablet had certainly gauged the Wind-Walker's domain well, giving the mythical creature something of solidarity in my mind, though it was still far easier for me to accept those peculiar clouds of ill omen than the Being striding among them...

II

It was something of a shock for me to discover, when finally I thought to look at my wristwatch, that Bridgeman's books had kept me busy all through the afternoon and it was now well into evening. I found that my eyes had started to ache with the strain of reading as it grew darker in the small library room. I put on the light and would have returned to the books yet again but for hearing, at the outer door of the house, a gentle knocking. The library door was slightly ajar so that I could hear the judge answering the knocking and his gruff welcome. I was sure that the voice that answered him was that of Bridgeman's widow, for it was vibrant with a nervous agitation as the visitor entered the house and went with the judge to his study. Well, I had desired to meet her; this seemed the perfect opportunity to introduce myself.

Yet at the open door to the judge's study I paused, then quickly stepped back out of sight. It seemed that my host and his visitor were engaged in some sort of argument. He had just answered to some unheard question: "Not *me,* my dear, that is out of the question...But if you insist upon this folly, then I'm sure I can find someone to help you. God knows I'd come with you myself — even on this wild-goose chase you propose, and despite the forecast of heavy snow — but...my dear, I'm an old man. My eyes are no good any more; my limbs are no longer as strong as they used to be. I'm afraid that this old body might let you down at the worst possible time. It's bad country north of here when the snows come."

"Is it simply that, Jason," she answered him in her nervous voice, "or is it really that you believe I'm a mad woman? That's what you as good as called me when I was here earlier."

"You must forgive me for that, Lucille, but let's face it — that story you tell is simply...*fantastic!* There's no positive proof that the boy headed this way at all, just this premonition of yours."

"The story I told you was the truth, Jason! As for my 'premon-

ition,' well, I've brought you proof! Look at this —"

There was a pause before the judge spoke again. Quietly he asked, "But what is this thing, Lucille? Let me get my glass. Hmm — I can see that it depicts —"

"No!" her cry, shrill and loud, cut him off, "No, don't mention *Them*, and please don't say His name!" The hysterical emphasis she placed on certain words was obvious, but she sounded calmer when, a few seconds later, she continued: "As for what it is —" I heard a metallic clinking, like a coin dropped on the tabletop, "just keep it here in the house. You will see for yourself. It was discovered clenched in Sam's right hand when they — when they found his poor, broken body."

"All that was twenty years ago —" the judge said, then paused again before asking: "Is it gold?"

"Yes, but of unknown manufacture. I've shown it to three or four experts over the years, and always the same answer. It is a very ancient thing, but from no known or recognizable culture. Only the fact that it is made of gold saves it from being completely alien! And even the gold is...not quite right. Kirby has one, too."

"Oh?" I could hear the surprise in the judge's voice. "And where did he get it? Why, just looking at this thing under the glass, I should have taken it for granted — even knowing nothing of it — that it's as rare as it's old!"

"I believe they are very rare indeed, surviving from an age before all earthly ages. Feel how cold it is. It has a chill like the ocean floor, and if you try to warm it...but try it for yourself. I can tell you now, though, that it will not *stay* warm. And I know what that means....

"Kirby received his in the mail some months ago, in the summer. We were at home in Merida, in Yucatan. As you know, I settled there after — after —"

"Yes, yes I know. But who would want to send the boy such a thing — and why?"

"I believe it was meant as — as a *reminder*, that's all — as a means to awaken in him all I have worked to keep dormant. I've already told you about...about Kirby, about his strange ways even as a baby. I thought they would leave him as he grew older. I was wrong. That last month before he vanished was the worst. It was after he received the talisman through the mail. Then, three weeks ago, he — he just packed a few things and —" She paused for a moment, I believed to compose herself, for an emotional catch had developed in her voice. I felt strangely moved.

"— As to who sent it to him, that's something I can't say. I can

only guess, but the package carried the Navissa postmark! That's why I'm here."

"The Navissa —" The judge seemed astounded. "But who would there be here to remember something that happened twenty years ago? And who, in any case, would want to make a gift of such a rare and expensive item to a complete stranger?"

The answer when it came was so low that I had difficulty making it out:

"There must have been *others,* Jason! Those people in Stillwater weren't the only ones who called Him master. Those worshipers of His — they still exist — they must! I believe it was one of them, carrying out his master's orders. As for where it came from in the first place, why, where else but —"

"No, Lucille, that's quite impossible," the judge cut her off. "Something I really can't allow myself to believe. If such things could be —"

"A madness the world could not face?"

"Yes, exactly!"

"Sam used to say the same thing. Nonetheless he sought the horror out, and brought me here with him, and then —"

"Yes, Lucille, I know what you believe happened then, but —"

"No buts, Jason — I want my son back. Help me, if you will, or don't help me. It makes no difference. I'm determined to find him, and I'll find him here, somewhere, I know it. If I have to, then I'll search him out alone, by myself, before it's too late!" Her voice had risen again, hysterically.

"No, there's no need for that," the old man cut in placatingly. "First thing tomorrow I'll find someone to help you. And we can get the Mounties from Nelson in on the job, too. They have a winter camp at Fir Valley only a few miles out of Navissa. I'll be able to get them on the telephone first thing in the morning. I'll need to, for the telephone will probably go out with the first bad snow."

"And you'll definitely find someone to help me personally — someone trustworthy?"

"That's my word. In fact I already know of one young man who might be willing. Of a very good family — and he's staying with me right now. You can meet him tomorrow —"

At this point I heard the scrape of chairs and pictured the two rising to their feet. Suddenly ashamed of myself to be standing there eavesdropping, I quickly returned to the library and pulled the door shut behind me. After some little time, during which the lady departed, I went again to Judge Andrews' study, this time tapping at the shut door and

entering at his word. I found the old man worriedly pacing the floor.

He stopped pacing as I entered. "Ah, David. Sit down, please, there's something I would like to ask you." He seated himself, shuffling awkwardly in his chair. "It's difficult to know where to begin —"

"Begin with Samuel R. Bridgeman," I answered. "I've had time to read his books now. Frankly, I find myself very interested."

"But how did you know—"

Thinking back on my eavesdropping, I blushed a little as I answered, "I've just seen Mrs. Bridgeman leaving. I'm guessing that it's her husband, or perhaps the lady herself, you want to talk to me about."

He nodded, picking up from his desk a golden medallion some two inches across its face, fingering its bas-relief work before answering. "Yes, you're right, but —"

"Yes?"

He sighed heavily in answer, then said, "Ah, well, I suppose I'll have to tell you the whole story, or what I know of it — that's the least I can do if I'm to expect your help." He shook his head. "That poor, demented woman!"

"Is she not quite...*right,* then?"

"Nothing like that at all," he answered hastily, gruffly. "She's as sane as I am. It's just that she's a little, well, *disturbed.*"

He then told me the whole of the thing, a story that lasted well into the night. I reproduce here what I can remember of his words. They formed an almost unbroken narrative that I listened to in silence to its end, a narrative which only served to strengthen that resolution of mine to follow this mystery down to a workable conclusion.

"As you are aware," the judge began, "I was a friend of Sam Bridgeman's in our younger days. How this friendship came about is unimportant, but I also knew Lucille before they married, and that is why she now approaches me for help after all these years. It is pure coincidence that I live now in Navissa, so close to where Sam died.

"Even in those early days Sam was a bit of a rebel. Of the orthodox sciences, including anthropology and ethnology, few interested Sam in their accepted forms. Dead and mythological cities, lands with exotic names and strange gods were ever his passion. I remember how he would sit and dream — of Atlantis and Mu, Ephiroth and Khurdisan, G'harne and lost Leng, R'lyeh and Theem'hdra, forgotten worlds of antique legend and myth — when by rights he should have been studying and working hard toward his future. And yet...that future came to nothing in the end.

"Twenty-six years ago he married Lucille, and because he was fairly well-to-do by then, having inherited a sizable fortune, he was able to escape a working life as we know it to turn his full attention to those ideas and ideals most dear to him. In writing his books, particularly his last book, he alienated himself utterly from colleagues and acknowledged authorities alike in those specific sciences upon which he lavished his 'imagination.' That was how they saw his — fantasies? — as the product of a wild imagination set free to wreck havoc among all established orders, scientific and theological included.

"Eventually he became looked upon as a fool, a naive clown who based his crazed arguments in Blavatsky, in the absurd theories of Scott-Elliot, in the insane epistles of Eibon and the warped translations of Harold Hadley Copeland, rather than in prosaic but proven historians and scientists....

"When exactly, or why, Sam became interested in the theogony of these northern parts — particularly in certain belief of the Indians and half-breeds, and in Eskimo legends of yet more northerly regions — I do not know, but in the end he himself began to *believe* them. He was especially interested in the legend of the snow- or wind-god, Ithaqua, variously called 'Wind-Walker,' 'Death-Walker,' 'Strider in the Star-Spaces,' etc., a being who supposedly walks in the freezing boreal winds and in the turbulent atmospheric currents of far northern lands and adjacent waters.

"As fortune — or misfortune — would have it, his decision to actually pay this region a visit coincided with problems of an internal nature in some few of the villages around here. There were strange undercurrents at work. Secret semireligious groups had moved into the area, in many cases apparently vagrant, here to witness and worship at a 'Great Coming!' Strange, certainly, but can you show me any single region of this earth of ours that does not have its crackpot organizations, religious or otherwise? Mind you, there has always been a problem with that sort of thing here....

"Well, a number of the members of these so-called esoteric groups were generally somewhat more intelligent than the average Indian, half-breed or Eskimo; they were mainly New Englanders, from such decadent Massachusetts towns as Arkham, Dunwich, and Innsmouth.

"The Mounties at Nelson saw no threat, however, for this sort of thing was common here; one might almost say that over the years there has been a surfeit of it! On this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I'd heard enough to make me decide one of two things: quit or smoke True.

I smoke True.

The low tar, low nicotine cigarette. Think about it.

King Regular: 11 mg. "tar", 0.6 mg. nicotine, King Menthol: 12 mg. "tar", 0.7 mg. nicotine, 100's Regular: 13 mg. "tar", 0.7 mg. nicotine, 100's Menthol: 13 mg. "tar", 0.8 mg. nicotine, av. per cigarette, FTC Report April '75.

Warning: The Surgeon General Has Determined That Cigarette Smoking Is Dangerous to Your Health.

occasion it was believed that certain occurrences in and about Stillwater and Navissa had drawn these rather polyglot visitors, for five years earlier there had indeed occurred a very large number of peculiar and still unsolved disappearances, to say nothing of a handful of inexplicable deaths at the same time.

"I've done a little research myself into just what happened, though I'm still very uncertain, but conjecture aside, hard figures and facts are — surprising? — no, they are downright disturbing!

"For instance, the *entire population* of one town, Stillwater vanished overnight! You need not take my word for it — research it for yourself. The newspapers were full of it.

"Well, now, add to a background like this a handful of tales concerning giant webbed footprints in the snow, stories of strange altars to forbidden gods in the woods, and a creature that comes on the wings of the winds to accept living sacrifices — and remember, please, that all such appear time and again in the history and legends of these parts — and you'll agree it's little wonder that the area has attracted so many weird types over the years.

"Not that I remember Sam Bridgeman as being a 'weird type,' you understand; but it was exactly this type of thing that brought him here when, after five years of quiet, the cycle of hysterical superstition and strange worship was again at its height. That was how things stood when he arrived here, and he brought his wife with him....

"The snow was already deep to the north when they came, but that did nothing at all to deter Sam; he was here to probe the old legends, and he would never be satisfied until he had done just that. He hired a pair of French-Canadian guides, swarthy characters of doubtful backgrounds, to take him and Lucille in search of...of what? Dreams and myths, fairy tales and ghost stories?

"They trekked north, and despite the uncouth looks of the guides, Sam soon decided that his choice of these two men had been a good one; they seemed to know the region quite well. Indeed, they appeared to be somehow, well, cowed out in the snows, different again from when Sam had found them, drunk and fighting in a Navissa bar. But then again, in all truth, he had had little choice but to hire these two, for with the five-year cycle of strangeness at its peak few of Navissa's regular inhabitants would have ventured far from their homes. And indeed, when Sam asked his guides why they seemed so nervous, they told him it was all to do with 'the season.' Not, they explained, the

winter season, but that of the strange myth-cycle. Beyond that they would say nothing, which only excited Sam's curiosity all the more — particularly since he had noticed that their restlessness grew apace the farther north they trekked.

"Then, one calm white night, with the tents pitched and a bright wood fire kindled, one of the guides asked Sam just what it was that he sought in the snow. Sam told him, mentioning the stories of Ithaqua the Snow-Thing, but got no further; for upon hearing the Wind-Walker's name spoken, the French-Canadian simply refused to listen to any more. Instead, he went off early to his tent where he was soon overheard muttering and arguing in a frightened and urgent voice with his companion. The next morning, when Sam roused himself, he discovered to his horror that he and his wife were alone, that the guides had run off and deserted them! Not only this, but they had taken all the provisions with them. The Bridgemans had only their tent, the clothing they stood in, their sleeping bags and personal effects. They had not even a box of matches with which to light a fire.

"Still, their case did not appear to be completely hopeless. They had had fair weather so far, and they were only three days and nights out from Navissa. But their trail had been anything but a straight one, so that when they set about making a return journey it was pure guesswork on Sam's part the correct direction in which to head. He knew something of the stars, however; and when the cold night came down, he was able to say with some certainty that they headed South.

"And yet lonely and vulnerable though they now felt, they had been aware even on that first day that they were not truly alone. On occasion they had crossed strange tracks, fresh-made by furtive figures that melted away into the firs or banks of snow whenever Sam called out to them across the wintry wastes. On the second morning, soon after setting out from their camp in the lee of tall pines, they came upon the bodies of their erstwhile guides; they had been horribly tortured and mutilated before dying. In the pockets of one of the bodies Sam found matches, and that night — though by now they knew the pangs of hunger — they at least had the warmth of a fire to comfort them. But ever in the flickering shadows, just outside the field of vision afforded by the leaping flames, there were those furtive figures, silent in the snow, watching and...waiting?

"They talked, Sam and Lucille, huddled together in the door of their tent before the warming fire, whispering of the dead guides and

how and why those men had come to such terrible ends; and they shivered at the surrounding shadows and the shapes that shifted within them. This country, Sam reasoned, must indeed be the territory of Ithaqua the Wind-Walker. At times, when the influence of old rites and mysteries was strongest, then the snow-god's worshipers — the Indians, half-breeds, and perhaps others less obvious and from farther parts — would gather here to attend His ceremonies. To the outsider, the unbeliever, this entire area must be forbidden, taboo! The guides had been outsiders...Sam and Lucille were outsiders, too....

"It must have been about this time that Lucille's nerves began to go, which would surely be understandable. The intense cold and the white wastes stretching out in all directions, broken only very infrequently by the boles and snow-laden branches of firs and pines — the hunger eating at her insides now — those half-seen figures lurking ever on the perimeter of her vision and consciousness — the terrible knowledge that what had happened to the guides could easily happen again — and the fact, no longer hidden by her husband, that she and Sam were — lost! Though they were making south, who could say that Navissa lay in their way, or even that they would ever have the strength to make it back to the town?

"Yes, I think that at that stage she must have become for the most part delirious, for certainly the things she 'remembers' as happening from that time onwards were delusion-inspired, despite their detail. And God knows that poor Sam must have been in a similar condition. At any rate, on the third night, unable to light a fire because the matches had somehow got damp, events took an even stranger turn.

"They had managed to pitch the tent, and Sam had gone inside to do whatever he could towards making it comfortable. Lucille, as the night came down more fully, was outside moving about to keep warm. She suddenly cried out to Sam that she could see distant fires at the four points of the compass. Then, in another moment, she screamed, and there came a rushing wind that filled the tent and brought an intense, instantaneous drop in temperature. Stiffly, and yet as quickly as he could, Sam stumbled out of the tent to find Lucille fallen to the snow. She could not tell him what had happened, could only mumble incoherently of 'something in the sky!'

"...God only knows how they lived through that night. Lucille's

recollections are blurred and indistinct; she believes now that she was in any case more dead than alive. Three days and nights in that terrible white waste, wholly without food and for the greater part of the time without even the warmth of a fire. But on the morning of the next day —

"Amazingly everything had changed for the better overnight. Apparently their fears — that if they did not first perish from exposure they would die at the hands of the unknown murderers of the two guides — had been unfounded. Perhaps, Sam conjectured, they had somehow managed to pass out of the forbidden territory; and now that they were no longer trespassers, as it were, they were eligible for whatever help Ithaqua's furtive worshipers could give them. Certainly that was the way things seemed to be, for in the snow beside their tent they found tinned soups, matches, a kerosene cooker similar to the one stolen by the unfortunate guides, a pile of branches and, finally, a cryptic note which said, simply: 'Navissa lies seven miles to the southeast.' It was as if Lucille's vision of the foregoing night had been an omen of good fortune, as if Ithaqua Himself had looked down and decided that the two lost and desperate human beings deserved another chance....

"By midday, with hot soup inside them, warmed and rested, having slept the morning through beside a fire, they were ready to complete their return journey to Navissa — or so they thought!

"Shortly after they set out, a light storm sprang up through which they pressed on until they came to a range of low, pine-covered hills. Navissa, Sam reckoned, must lie just beyond the hills. Despite the strengthening storm and falling temperature, they decided to fight on while they had the strength for it, but no sooner had they started to climb than nature seemed to set all her elements against them. I have checked the records and that night was one of the worst this region had known in many years.

"It soon became obvious that they could not go on through the teeth of the storm but must wait it out. Just as Sam had made up his mind to pitch camp, they entered a wood of thick firs and pines; and since this made the going easier, they pressed on a little longer. Soon, however, the storm picked up to such an unprecedented pitch that they knew they must take shelter there and then. In these circumstances they came across that which seemed a veritable haven from the storm.

"At first, seen through the whipping trees and blinding snow,

the thing looked like a huge squat cabin, but as they approached it they could see that it was in fact a great raised platform of sorts, sturdily built of logs. The snow, having drifted up deeply on three sides of this edifice, had given it the appearance of a flat-roofed cabin. The fourth side being free of snow, the whole formed a perfect shelter into which they crept out of the blast. There, beneath that huge log platform whose purpose they were too weary to even guess at, Sam lit the kerosene stove and warmed some soup. They felt cheered by the timely discovery of this refuge, and since after some hours the storm seemed in no way about to abate, they made down their sleeping bags and settled themselves in for the night. Both of them fell instantly asleep.

"And it was later that night that disaster struck. How, in what manner Sam died, must always remain a matter for conjecture; but I believe that Lucille saw him die, and the sight of it must have temporarily broken her already badly weakened nerves. Certainly the things which she *believes* she saw, and one thing in particular which she *believes* happened that night, never could have been. God forbid!

"That part of Lucille's story, anyway, is composed of fragmentary metal images hard to define and even harder to put into common words. She has spoken of beacon fires burning in the night, of a 'congregation at Ithaqua's altar,' of an evil, ancient Eskimo chant issuing from a hundred adulatory throats — and of that which *answered* that chant, drawn down from the skies by the call of its worshipers....

"I will go into no details of what she 'remembers' except to repeat that Sam died, and that then, as I see it, his poor wife's tortured mind must finally have broken. It seems certain, though, that even after the...horror...she must have received help from someone; she could not possibly have covered even a handful of miles in her condition on foot and alone — and yet she was found *here,* near Navissa, by certain of the town's inhabitants.

"She was taken to a local doctor, who was frankly astounded that, frozen to the marrow as she was, she had not died of exposure in the wastes. It was a number of weeks before she was well enough to be told of Sam, how he had been found dead, a block of human ice out in the snows.

"And when she pressed them, then it came out about the condition of his body, how strangely torn and mangled it had been, as if ravaged by savage beasts, or as if it had fallen from a

great height, or perhaps a combination of both. The official verdict was that he must have stumbled over some high cliff onto sharp rocks, and that his body had subsequently been dragged for some distance over the snow by wolves. This latter fitted with the fact that while his body showed all the signs of a great fall, there were no high places in the immediate vicinity. Why the wolves did not devour him remains unknown."

Thus ended the judge's narrative, and though I sat for some three minutes waiting for him to continue, he did not do so. In the end I said, "And she believes that her husband was killed by...?"

"That Ithaqua killed him? — Yes, and she believes in rather worse things, if you can imagine that." Hurriedly then he went on giving me no opportunity to question his meaning.

"One or two other things: First, Lucille's temperature. It has never been quite normal since that time. She tells me medical men are astounded that her body temperature never rises above a level which would be death to anyone else. They say it must be a symptom of severe nervous disorders but are at a loss to reconcile this with her otherwise fairly normal physical condition. And finally this," he held out the medallion for my inspection.

"I want you to keep it for now. It was found on Sam's broken body; in fact it was clenched in his hand. Lucille got it with his other effects. She tells me there is — something strange about it. If any, well, *phenomena* really do attach to it, you should notice them..."

I took the medallion and looked at it — at its loathsome bas-relief work, scenes of a battle between monstrous beings which only some genius artist in the throes of madness might conceive — before asking, "And is that all?"

"Yes, I think so — no, wait. There is something else, of course there is. Lucille's boy, Kirby. He...well, in many ways it seems he is like Sam: impetuous, with a love of strange and esoteric lore and legend, a wanderer at heart, I suspect; but his mother has always kept him down, earthbound. At any rate, he's now run off. Lucille believes that he's come north. She thinks perhaps that he intends to visit those regions where his father died. Don't ask me why; I think Kirby must be something of a neurotic where his father is concerned. This may well have come down to him from his mother.

"Anyway, she intends to follow and find him and take him home again away from here. Of course, if no evidence comes to light to show him positively to be in these parts, then there will be nothing for you to

do. But if he really is here somewhere, then it would be a great personal favor to me if you would go with Lucille and look after her when she decides to search him out. Goodness only knows how it might affect her to go again into the snows, with so many bad memories."

"I'll certainly do as you ask, Judge, and gladly," I answered immediately. "Frankly, the more I learn of Bridgeman, the more the mystery fascinates me. There *is* a mystery, you would agree, despite all rationalizations?"

"A mystery?" he pondered my question. "The snows are strange, David, and too much snow and privation can bring fantastic illusions — like the mirages of the desert. In the snow men may dream while yet awake. And there again, there is that weird five-year cycle of strangeness which definitely affects this region. Myself, I suspect that it all has some quite simple explanation. A mystery? — I say the world is full of mysteries..."

III

That night I experienced my first taste of the weird, the inexplicable, the *outre*. And that night I further learned that I, too, must be susceptible to the five-year cycle of strangeness; either that, or I had eaten too well before taking to my bed!

There was first the dream of Cyclopean submarine cities of mad angles and proportions, which melted into vague but frightful glimpses of the spaces between the stars, through which I seemed to walk or float at speeds many times that of light. Nebulae floated by like bubbles in wine, and strange constellations expanded before me and dwindled in my wake as I passed through them. This floating, or walking, was accompanied by the sounds of a tremendous striding, like the world-shaking footsteps of some ponderous giant, and there was (of all things) an ether wind that blew about me the scent of stars and shards of shattered planets.

Finally all of these impressions faded to a nothingness, and I was as a mote lost in the darkness of dead eons. Then there came another wind — not the wind that carried the odor of outer immensities or the pollen of blossoming planets — a tangible, shrieking gale-wind that whirled me about and around until I was sick and dizzy and in dread of being dashed to pieces. And I awoke.

I awoke and thought I knew why I had dreamed such a strange dream, a nightmare totally outside anything I had previously known. For out in the night it raged and blew, a storm that filled my room with its roaring until I could almost

feel the tiles being lifted from the roof above.

I got out of bed and went to the window, drawing the curtains cautiously and looking out — before stumbling back with my eyes popping and my mouth agape in an exclamation of utter amazement and disbelief. *Outside, the night was as calm as any I ever saw, with the stars gleaming clear and bright and not even a breeze to stir the small firs in the judge's garden!*

As I recoiled — amidst the rush and roar of winds which seemed to have their origin in my very room, even though I could feel no motion of the air and while nothing visibly stirred — I knocked down the golden medallion from where I had left it upon my window ledge. On the instant, as the dull yellow thing clattered to the smooth pine floor, the roaring of the wind was cut off, leaving a silence that made my head spin with its suddenness. The cacophony of mad winds had not "died away" — quite literally it had been *cut off!*

Shakily I bent to pick the medallion up, noticing that despite the warmth of my room it bore a chill that must have been near to freezing. On impulse I put the thing to my ear. It seemed that just for a second, receding, I could hear as in a sounding shell the rush and roar and hum of winds far, far away, winds blowing beyond the rim of the world!

In the morning, of course, I realized that it had all been a dream, not merely the fantastic submarine and interspatial sequences but also those occurrences following immediately upon my "awakening." Nevertheless, I questioned the judge as to whether he had heard anything odd during the night. He had not, and I was strangely relieved....

Three days later, when it was beginning to look like Lucille Bridgeman's suspicions regarding her son were without basis — this despite all her efforts, and the Judge's, to prove the positive presence of Kirby Bridgeman in the vicinity of Navissa — then came word from the Mounties at Fir Valley that a young man answering Kirby's description had indeed been seen. He had been with a mixed crowd of seemingly destitute outsiders and local layabouts camping in crumbling Stillwater. Observers — two aging but inveterate gold-grubbers, out on their last prospectors had been by no means made welcome in Stillwater, nonetheless they had noted that this particular young man had appeared to be in a sort of trance or daze and that the others with him had held him in some

kind of reverence; they had been tending to his needs and generally looking after him.

It was this description of the boy's condition (which made it sound rather as if he were not quite right in his head) that determined me to inquire tactfully of his mother about him as soon as the opportunity presented itself. For the last two days, though, I had been studying the handling and maintenance of a vehicle that the judge termed a "snow-cat"; a fairly large motorized sledge of very modern design that he had hired for Mrs. Bridgeman from a friend of his in the town. The vehicle seemed a fairly economical affair, capable in suitable conditions of carrying two adults and provisions over snow at a speed of up to twenty miles per hour. It was capable, too, of a somewhat slower speed over more normal terrain. With such a vehicle two people might easily travel 150 miles without refueling, in comparative comfort at that, and over country no automobile could possibly challenge.

The next morning saw us setting out aboard the snow-cat. Though we planned on returning to Navissa every second or third day to refuel, we had sufficient supplies aboard for at least a week. First we headed for Stillwater.

Following a fall of snow during the night, the track that led us to the ghost town was mainly buried beneath a white carpet almost a foot deep, but even so, it was plain that this barely fourth-class road (in places a mere trail) was in extremely poor repair. I recalled the judge telling me that very few people went to Stillwater now, following the strange affair of twenty years gone, and doubtless this accounted for the track's derelict appearance in those places where the wind had blown its surface clean.

In Stillwater we found a constable of the Mounties just preparing to leave the place for camp at Fir Valley. He had gone to the ghost town specifically to check out the story of the two old prospectors. Introducing himself as Constable McCauley, the Mountie showed us round the town.

Originally the place had been built of stout timbers, with stores and houses and one very ramshackle "saloon" bordering a main street and with lesser huts and habitations set back behind the street facades. Now, however, the main street was grown with grass and weeds beneath the snow, and even the stoutest buildings were quickly falling into dilapidation. The shacks and lesser houses to the rear leaned like old men with the weight of years, and rotten doorposts with their paint long flaked away sagged on every hand,

threatening at any moment to collapse and bring down the edifices framing them into the snow. Here and there one or two windows remained, but warped and twisting frames had long since claimed by far the greater number, so that now sharp shards of glass stood up in broken rows from sills like grinning teeth in blackly leering mouths. A stained, tattered curtain flapped moldering threads in the chill midday breeze. Even though the day was fairly bright, there was a definite gloominess about Stillwater, an aura of something *not quite right,* of strange menace, seeming to brood like a mantle of evil about the place.

Overall, and ignoring the fact that twenty years had passed since last it knew habitation, the town seemed to be falling far too quickly into decay, almost as if some elder magic had blighted the place in an effort to return it to its origins. Saplings already stood tall through the snow in the main street; grass and weeds proliferated on window ledges, along facades, and in the black gaps where boards had fallen from the lower stories of the crumbling buildings.

Mrs. Bridgeman seemed to notice none of this, only that her son was no longer in the town...if he had ever been there.

In the largest standing building, a tavern that seemed to have fared better in its battle against decay than the rest of the town, we brewed coffee and heated soups. There, too, we found signs of recent if temporary, habitation, for the floor in one of the rooms was fairly littered with freshly empty cans and bottles. This debris, plus the blackened ashes of a fire built on stones in one corner, stood as plain testimony that the building had been used by that group of unknown persons whose presence the prospectors had reported.

The Mountie mentioned how chill the place was, and at his remark it dawned on me that indeed the tavern seemed colder inside (where by all rights it ought to have been at least marginally warmer) than out in the raw air of the derelict streets. I was about to voice this thought when Mrs. Bridgeman, suddenly paler by far than usual, put down her coffee and stood up from where she sat upon a rickety chair.

She looked first at me — a queer, piercing glance — then at McCauley. "My son was here," she abruptly said, as if she knew it quite definitely. "Kirby was here!"

The Mountie looked hard at her, then stared about the room in mystification. "There's some sign that your boy was here, Mrs. Bridgeman?"

She had turned away and for a

moment did not answer. She seemed to be listening intently for something far off. "Can't you hear it?"

Constable McCauley looked at me out of the corner of his eye. He frowned. The room was very still. "Hear what, Mrs. Bridgeman? What is it?"

"Why, the wind!" she answered, her eyes clouded and distant. "The wind blowing way out between the worlds!"

Half an hour we were ready to move again. The Mountie in the meantime had taken me to one side, to ask me if I didn't think the search we planned was just a little bit hazardous considering Mrs. Bridgeman's condition. Plainly he thought she was a bit touched. Perhaps she was! God knows, if what the judge told me was true, the poor woman had enough reason. Being ignorant of her real problem at that time, however, I shrugged her strangeness off, mentioning her relationship with her son as being obsessive out of all proportion to reality. In truth, this was the impression I had already half formed — but it did not explain the *other* thing.

I made no mention of it to the Mountie. For one thing, it was none of his business; and for another, I hardly wanted him thinking that perhaps I, too, was "a bit touched." It was simply this: in the derelict tavern — when Mrs. Bridgeman had asked, "Can't you hear it?" — I had in fact heard something. At the exact moment of her inquiry, I had put my hand into a pocket of my parka for a pack of cigarettes. My hand had come into contact with that strange golden medallion, and as my fingers closed upon the chill shape, I had felt a thrill as of weird energies, an electric tingle that seemed to energize all my senses simultaneously. I felt the cold of the spaces between the stars; I smelled again, as in my dreams, the scents of unknown worlds; for the merest fraction of a second there opened before me reeling vistas, incredible eons flashing by in a twinkling; and I, too, heard a wind — a howling *sentience* from far beyond the Universe we know!

It had been so momentary, this — vision? — that I thought little more of it. Doubtless my mind, as I touched the medallion, had conjured in connection with the thing parts of that dream in which it had featured so strongly. That was the only explanation....

I calculate that by 5:00 p.m. we must have been something like fifty miles directly north of Stillwater. It was there, in the lee of a low hill covered by tall conifers whose snow-laden branches bowed almost

to the ground, that Mrs. Bridgeman called a halt for the night. Freezing, the snow already had a thin, crisp crust. I set up our two tiny bivouacs beneath a pine whose white branches formed in themselves something of a tent, and there I lit our stove and prepared a meal.

I had decided that the time was ripe to tactfully approach Mrs. Bridgeman regarding those many facets of her story of which I was still ignorant; but then, as if there were not enough of mystery, I was witness to that which brought vividly back to me what the judge had told me of the widow's body temperature.

We had finished our meal, and I had prepared my bivouac for the night, spreading my sleeping bag and packing snow close to the lower outside walls of the tiny tent against freezing drafts. I offered to do the same for Mrs. Bridgeman, but she assured me that she could attend to that herself. For the moment she wanted "a breath of fresh air." That turn of phrase in itself might have been enough to puzzle me (the air could hardly have been fresher!) but in addition she then cast off her parka, standing only in sweater and slacks, before stepping out from under the lowered branches into the sub-zero temperatures of falling night!

Heavily wrapped, still I shivered as I watched her from the sanctury of our hideaway beneath the tree. For half an hour she simply wandered to and fro over the snow, occasionally glancing at the sky and then again into the darkening distance. Finally, as I suddenly realized that I was quickly drawing close to freezing while waiting for her to come back to camp, I went stiffly out to her with her parka. She must by now, I believed, be very close to suffering from exposure. Blaming myself that I had not recognized sooner how terrifically cold it was, I came up to her and threw her parka about her shoulders. Imagine my astonishment when she turned with a questioning look, completely at ease and plainly quite comfortable, immensely surprised at my concern!

She must have seen immediately how cold I was. Chiding me that I had not taken greater care to keep warm, she hurried back with me to the bivouacs beneath the tree. There she quickly boiled water and made coffee. She drank none of the hot, reviving fluid herself, however, and I was so astounded at her apparent immunity to the cold that I forgot all about those questions I had intended to ask. Since Mrs. Bridgeman now plainly intended to retire and since my own sleeping bag lay warm and inviting inside my bivouac, I simply finished off the coffee, turned down the

stove and lay down for the night.

I was suddenly tired, and the last thing I saw before sleeping was a patch of sky through the branches, illumined by brightly twinkling stars. Perhaps that picture of the heavens, imprinted upon my mind's eye as I fell asleep, colored my dreams. Certainly I dreamed of stars all night long, but they were uneasy dreams. The stars I saw were particularly sentient and paired like strange eyes; they glowed carmine against a moving black background of hideously suggestive design and immense proportions....

In the morning over breakfast — cheese and tomato sandwiches, followed by coffee and fruit juice — I briefly mentioned Mrs. Bridgeman's apparent immunity to the cold, at which she looked at me with a very wry expression and said, "You may believe me, Mr. Lawton, when I tell you that I would give all of what little I have just once to feel the cold. It is this — *affliction* — of mine, an extremely rare condition which I contracted here in the north. And it has come out in —"

"In Kirby?" I hazarded the guess.

"Yes." She looked at me again, shrewdly this time. "How much did Judge Andrews tell you?"

I could not conceal my embarrassment. "He — he told me of your husband's death, and —"

"What did he say of my son?"

"Very little. He is not the kind of man to gossip idly, Mrs. Bridgeman, and —"

"And you suspect that there might be much to gossip about?" She was suddenly angry.

"I only know that I'm here, helping a woman look for her son, following her instincts and whims without question, as a favor to an old man. To be absluteły truthful, I suspect that there is a great mystery here; and I admit that I am addicted to mysteries, as curious as a cat. But my curiosity is without malice, you must believe that, and my only desire is to help you."

She turned away from me for a moment or two, and I thought she was still angry, but when she turned back her face was much more composed.

"And did the judge not warn you that there would be — danger?"

"Danger? Heavy snow is due, certainly —"

"No, the snow is nothing — I didn't mean the snow. The judge has Sam's books; have you read them?"

"Yes, but what danger can there be in mythology and folklore?" In fact, I quessed what she was getting at, but better to hear it from her own lips. as she "believed" it and as her husband had "believed" it before her.

"What danger in myths and legends, you ask?" she smiled mirthlessly. "I asked the same question of Sam when he wanted to leave me in Navissa. God, that I'd listened to him! What danger in folklore? I can't tell you directly — not without you thinking me a madwoman, as I'm sure the judge must more than half believe — but I'll tell you this: today we return to Navissa. On the way you can teach me how to drive the snow-cat. I won't take you to horrors you can't conceive."

I tried to argue the point but she would say no more. We decamped in silence, packed the bivouacs and camp utensils aboard the cat, and then, despite a last effort on my part to dissuade her, she demanded that we head directly for Navissa.

For half an hour, traveling fairly slowly, we followed the course of a frozen stream between brooding fir forests whose dark interiors were made darker still by the shrouding snow that covered the upper branches. It was as I turned the snow-cat away from the stream, around a smaller copse of trees to head more nearly south, that I accidentally came upon that which should have gone far towards substantiating Mrs. Bridgeman's hints of terrible dangers.

It was a large depression in the snow, to which I had to react quickly in order to avoid a spill, when we might easily have tumbled directly into it. I halted our machine, and we stepped down to take a closer look at this strangely sunken place in the snow.

Here the drift was deeper, perhaps three or four feet, but in the center of the depression it had been compacted almost to the earth beneath, as if some great weight had rested there. The size of this concavity must have been almost twenty feet long by seven or eight feet wide, and its shape was something like —

Abruptly the judge's words came back to me — what he had mentioned of the various manifestations of Ithaqua, the Wind-Walker — *and particularly of giant, webbed footprints in the snow!*

But of course that was ridiculous. And yet....

I began to walk round the perimeter of the fantastic depression, only turning when I heard Mrs. Bridgeman cry out behind me. Paler than I had ever seen her before, now she leaned dizzily against the snow-cat, her hand to her throat. I went quickly to her.

"Mrs. Bridgeman?"

"He — *He was here!*" she spoke in a horrified whisper.

"Your son?"

"No, not Kirby — *Him!*" She pointed, staring wide-eyed at the

compacted snow of the depression. "Ithaqua, the Wind-Walker — that is His sign. And that means that I may already be too late!"

"Mrs. Bridgeman," I made a half-hearted attempt to reason with her, "plainly this depression marks the spot where a number of animals rested during the night. The snow must have drifted about them, leaving this peculiar shape."

"There was no snow last night, Mr. Lawton," she answered, more composed now, "but in any case your explanation is quite impossible. Why, if there had been a number of animals here, surely they would have left tracks in the snow when they moved. Look about you. There are no tracks here! No, this is the footprint of the fiend. The horror was here — and somewhere, at this very moment, my son is trying to search Him out, helped on by those poor devils that worship Him!"

I saw my chance then to avoid an early return to Navissa. If we went back now, I might never learn the whole story, and I would never to able to face the judge, having let him down. "Mrs. Bridgeman, it's plain that if we go south now we're only wasting time. I for one am willing to face whatever danger there may be, though I can still see no such danger. However, if some peril does face Kirby, then we won't be helping him any by returning to Navissa. It would help, though, if I knew the background story. Some of it I know already, but there must be a lot you can tell me. Now listen, we have enough fuel for about 120 miles more. This is my proposition: that we carry on looking for your son to the north. If we have not found him by the time our fuel reserves are halved, then we head back in a direct line for Navissa. Furthermore, I swear here and now that I'll never divulge anything you may tell me or anything I may see while you live. Now, then — we're wasting time, What do you say?"

She hesitated, turning my proposition over in her mind, and as she did so, I saw to the north the spreading of a cloud sheet across the sky and sensed that peculiar change of atmosphere which ever precedes bad weather. Again I prompted her: "The sky is growing more sullen all the time. We're in for plenty of snow — probably tonight. We really can't afford to waste time if we want to find Kirby before the worst of the weather sets in. Soon the glass will begin to fall, and —"

"The cold won't bother Kirby, Mr. Lawton — but you're right, there's no time to waste. From now on our breaks must be shorter, and we must try to travel faster. Later today I'll tell you what I can of...of everything. Believe what you will, it makes little difference, but for the

last time I warn you — if we find Kirby, then in all probability we shall also find the utmost horror!"

IV

With regard to the weather, I was right. Having turned again to the north, skirting dense fir forests and crossing frozen streams and low hills, by 10:30 a.m. we were driving through fairly heavy snow. The glass was far down, though mercifully there was little wind. All this time — despite a certainty in my heart that there would be none — nevertheless, I found myself watching out for more of those strange and inexplicable hollows in the snow.

A dense copse where the upper branches interlaced, forming a dark umbrella to hold up a roof of snow, served us for a midday camp. There, while we prepared a hot meal and as we ate, Mrs. Bridgeman began to tell me about her son, about his remarkable childhood and his strange leanings as he grew into a man. Her first revelation, however, was the most fantastic, and plainly the judge had been quite right to suspect that the events of twenty years gone had turned her mind, at least as far as her son was concerned.

"Kirby," she started without preamble, "is not Sam's son. I love Kirby, naturally, but he is in no wise a child of love. He was born of the winds. No, don't interrupt me, I want no rationalizations.

"Can you understand me, Mr. Lawton? I suppose not. Indeed, at first I, too, thought that I was mad, that the whole thing had been a nightmare. I thought so right until the time — until Kirby was born. Then, as he grew up from a baby, I became less sure. Now I know that I was never mad. It was no nightmare that came to me here in the snow but a monstrous fact! And why not? Are not the oldest religions and legends known to man full of stories of gods lusting after the daughters of men? There *were* giants in the olden times, Mr. Lawton. There still are.

"Do you recall the Wendy-Smith expedition of '33? What do you suppose he found, that poor man, in the fastnesses of Africa? What prompted him to say these words, which I know by heart: 'There are fabulous legends of Star-Born creatures who inhabited this Earth many millions of years before Man appeared and who were still here, in certain black places, when he eventually evolved. They are, I am sure, to an extent here even now.'

"Wendy-Smith *was sure*, and so am I. In 1913 two monsters were born in Dunwich to a degenerate half-wit of a woman. They are both dead now, but there are still whispers in Dunwich of the affair,

and of the father who is hinted to have been other than human. Oh, there are many examples of survivals from olden times, of beings and forces which have reached godlike proportions in the minds of men, and who is to deny that at least some of them could be real?

"And where Ithaqua is concerned — why! — there are elementals of the air mentioned in every mythology known to man. Rightly so, for even today, and other than this Ithaqua of the Snows, there are strange winds that blow madness and horror into the minds of men. I mean winds like the *Foehn*, the south wind of Alpine valleys. And what of the piping winds of subterranean caverns, like that of the Calabrian Caves, which has been known to leave stout cavers white-haired, babbling wrecks? What do we understand of such forces?

"Our human race is a colony of ants, Mr. Lawton, inhabiting an anthill at the edge of a limitless chasm called infinity. All things may happen in infinity, and who knows what might come out of it? What do we know of *the facts* of anything, in our little corner of a never-ending universe, in this transient revolution in the space-time continuum? Seeping down from the stars at the beginning of time there were giants — beings who walked or flew across the spaces between the worlds, inhabiting and using entire systems at their will — and some of them still remain. What would the race of man be to creatures such as these? I'll tell you — we are the plankton of the seas of space and time!

"But there, I'm going on a bit, away from the point. The facts are these: that before I came to Navissa with Sam, he had already been told that he was sterile, and that after I left — after that horror had killed my husband — well, then I was pregnant.

"Of course, at first I believed that the doctors were wrong, that Sam had not been sterile at all, and this seemed to be borne out when my baby was born just within eight months of Sam's death. Obviously, in the normal scale of reckoning, Kirby was conceived before we came to Navissa. And yet it was a difficult pregnancy, and as a newborn baby he was a weedy, strange little thing — frail and dreamy and far too quiet — so that even without knowing much of children I nevertheless found myself thinking of his birth as having been...premature!

"His feet were large even for a boy, and his toes were webbed with a pink stretching of skin that thickened and lengthened as he grew. Understand, please, that my boy was in no way a freak — not

visibly. Many people have this webbing between their toes; some have it between their fingers too. In all other respects he seemed to be completely normal. Well, perhaps not completely....

"Long before he could walk, he was talking — baby talk, you know — but not to me. Always it was when he was alone in his cot, and always when there was a wind. He could hear the wind, and he used to talk to it. But that was nothing really remarkable; grown children often talk to invisible playmates, people and creatures that only they can see; except that I used to listen to Kirby, and sometimes —

"Sometimes I could swear that the winds talked back to him!

"You may laugh if you wish, Mr. Lawton, and I don't suppose I could blame you, but there always seemed to be a wind about our home, when everywhere else the air was still....

"As Kirby grew older this didn't seem to happen so frequently, or perhaps I simply grew used to it, I really don't know. But when he should have been starting school, well that was out of the question. He was such a dreamer, in no way slow or backward, you understand, but he constantly lived in a kind of dreamworld. And always — though he seemed later to have given up his strange conversations with drafts and breezes — he had this fascination with the wind.

"One summer night when he was seven, a wind came up that threatened to blow the very house down. It came from the sea, a north wind off the Gulf of Mexico — or perhaps it came from farther away than that, who can say? At any rate, I was frightened, as were most of the families in the area where we lived. Such was the fury of that demon wind, and it reminded me so of...of another wind I had known. Kirby sensed my fear. It was the strangest thing, but he threw open a window and he shouted. He shouted right into the teeth of that howling, banshee storm. Can you imagine that? A small child, teeth bared and hair streaming, shouting at a wind that might have lifted him right off the face of the Earth!

"And yet in another minute the worst of the storm was over, leaving Kirby scolding and snapping at the smaller gusts of air that yet remained, until the night was as still as any other summer night....

"At ten he became interested in model airplanes, and one of his private tutors helped him and encouraged him to design and build his own. You see, he was far ahead of other children his own age. One of his models created a lot of excitement when it was shown at an exhibition of flying models at a local club. It had a very strange shape; its underside was all rippled

and warped. It worked on a gliding principle of my son's own invention, having no motor but relying upon what Kirby called his 'rippled-air principle.' I remember he took it to the gliding club that day, and that the other members — children and adults alike — laughed at his model and said it couldn't possibly fly. Kirby flew it for them for an hour, and they all marveled while it seemingly defied gravity in a fantastic series of flights. Then, because they had laughed at him, he smashed the model down to its balsa wood and tissue paper components to strew them like confetti at the feet of the spectators. That was his pride working, even as a child. I wasn't there myself, but I'm told that a designer from one of the big model companies cried when Kirby destroyed his glider....

"He loved kites, too — he always had a kite. He would sit for hours and simply watch his kite standing on the air at the end of its string.

"When he was thirteen he wanted binoculars so that he could study the birds in flight. Hawks were of particular interest to him — the way they hover, motionless except for the rapid beating of their wings. They, too, seem almost to walk on the wind.

"Then came the day when a more serious and worrying aspect of Kirby's fascination with the air and flight came to light. For a long time I had been worried about him, about his constant restlessness and moodiness and his ominous obsession.

"We were visiting Chichen Itza, a trip I hoped would take Kirby's mind off other things. In fact the trip had a twofold purpose; the other was that I had been to Chichen Itza before with Sam, and this was my way of remembering how it had been. Every now and then I would visit a place where we had been happy before...before his death.

"There were, however, a number of things I had not taken into account. There is often a wind playing amoung those ancient ruins, and the ruins themselves — with their aura of antiquity, their strange glyphs, their history of bloody worship and nighted gods — can be...disturbing.

"I had forgotten, too, that the Mayas had their own god of the air, Quezalcoatl, the plumed serpent, and I suspect that this was almost my undoing.

"Kirby had been quiet and moody during the outward trip, and he stayed that way even after freshening up and while we began to explore the ancient buildings and temples. It was while I was admiring other ruins that Kirby climbed the high, hideously adorn-

ed Temple of the Warriors, with its facade of plumed serpents, their mouths fanged and tails rampant.

"He was seen to fall — or jump — by at least two dozen people, mainly Mexicans, but later they all told the same story: how the wind had seemed almost to buoy him up; how he had seemed to fall in slow motion; how he had uttered an errie cry before stepping into space, like a call to strange gods for assistance. And after that terrible fall, onto ancient stone flags and from such a great height...?

"It was a miracle, people said, that Kirby was unhurt.

"Well, eventually I was able to convince the authorities at the site that Kirby must have fallen, and I was able to get him away before he came out of his faint. Oh, yes, he had fainted. A fall like that, and the only result a swoon!

"But though I had explained away the incident as best I could, I don't suppose I could ever have explained the look on Kirby's face as I carried him away — that smile of triumph or strange satisfaction.

"Now all this happened not long after his fourteenth birthday, at a time when here in the north the five-year cycle of so-called 'superstitious belief and mass hysteria' was once more at its height, just as it is now. So far as I was concerned, there was an undeniable connection.

"Since then — and I blame myself that I've only recently discovered this — Kirby has been a secret saver, hoarding away whatever money he could lay his hands on towards some future purpose or ambition; and now of course I know that this was his journey north. All his life, you see, he has followed the trail of his destiny, and I don't suppose that there was anything I could have done to change it.

"A short time ago something happened to clinch it, something that drew Kirby north like a magnet. Now — I don't know what the end will be, *but I must see it* — I must find out, one way or the other, once and for all..."

V

By 1:30 p.m. we were once again mobile, our vehicle driving through occasional flurries of snow, fortunately with a light tail wind to boost us on our way. And it was not long before we came upon signs that warned of the presence of others there in that white waste, fresh snowshoe tracks that crossed our path at a tangent and moved in the direction of low hills. We followed these tracks — apparently belonging to a group of at least three persons — until they converged with others atop one of the low bald hills. Here I halted the snow-cat and dismounted, peering

out at the wilderness around and discovering that from here, between flurries of snow, I could roughly make out the site of our last camp. It dawned on me at once that this would have been a wonderful vantage point from which to keep us under observation.

Then Mrs. Bridgeman tugged at the sleeve of my parka, pointing away to the north where finally I made out a group of black dots against the pure white background straggling toward a distant pine forest.

"We must follow them," she declared. "They will be members of His order, on their way to ceremonies. Kirby may even be with them!" At the thought her voice took on a feverish excitement: "Quickly — we mustn't lose them!"

But lose them we did.

By the time we reached that stretch of open ground where first Mrs. Bridgeman had spied the unknown group, its members had already disappeared into the darkness of the trees some hundreds of yards away. At the edge of the forest I again brought our vehicle to a halt, and though we might easily have followed the tracks through the trees — which was my not-so-delicate companion's immediate and instinctive desire — that would have meant abandoning the snow-cat.

Instead, I argued that we should skirt the forest, find a vantage point on its northern fringe, and there await the emergence of whichever persons they were who chose to wander these wastes at the onset of winter. To this seemingly sound proposal Mrs. Bridgeman readily enough agreed, and within the hour we were hidden away in a cluster of pines beyond the forest proper. There we took turns to watch the fringe of the forest, and while I took first watch, Mrs. Bridgeman made a pot of coffee. We had only unpacked our stove, deeming it unwise to make ourselves too comfortable in case we should need to be on the move in a hurry.

After only twenty minutes at my post I would have been willing to swear that the sky had snowed itself out for the day. Indeed I made just such a comment to my pale companion when she brought me a cup of coffee. The leaden heavens had cleared — there was hardly a cloud in sight in the afternoon sky — and then, as if from nowhere, there came the wind!

Instantly the temperature dropped, and I felt the hairs in my nostrils stiffening and cracking with each sniff of icy air. The remaining half cup of coffee in my hand froze in a matter of seconds, and a rime of frost sprang up on my eyebrows. Heavily wrapped as I

was, still I felt the cold striking through, and I drew back into the comparative shelter of the trees. In all my meteorological experience I have never known or heard of anything like it before. The storm that came with the wind and the cold, rising up in the space of the next half hour, took me totally by surprise.

Looking up, through gaps in the snow-laden branches, I could plainly see the angry boiling up of clouds into a strange mixture of cumulonimbus and nimbostratus, where only moments before there had been no clouds at all! If the sky had seemed leaden earlier in the day, now it positively glowered. The atmosphere pressed down with an almost tanglible weight upon our heads.

And finally it snowed.

Mercifully, and despite the fact that all the symptons warned of a tremendous storm to come, the wind remained only moderate, but by comparison the snow came down as if it had never snowed before. The *husshhh* of settling snow was quite audible as the huge flakes fell in gust-driven, spiraling myriads to the ground.

Plainly my watch on the forest was no longer necessary, indeed impossible, for such was the curtain of falling snow that visibility was down to no more than a few feet. We were stuck, but surely no more so than that suspicious band of wanderers in the forest — members of "His order," as Mrs. Bridgeman would have it. We would have to wait the weather out, and so would they.

For the next two hours, until about 5:00 p.m., I busied myself making a windbreak of fallen branches and packed snow until even the moderate wind was shut out of our hideaway. Then I built a small fire in the center of this sheltered area close to the snow-cat. Whatever happened, I did not want the works of that machine put out of order by freezing temperatures.

During all this time Mrs. Bridgeman simply sat and brooded, plainly unconcerned with the cold. She was frustrated, I imagined, by our inability to get on with the search. In the same period, busy as I was with my hands, nevertheless I was able to ponder much of what had passed, drawing what half-formed conclusions I could in the circumstances.

The truth of the matter was that there did seem to be too many coincidences here for comfort, and personally I had already experienced a number of things previously unknown to me or alien to my nature. I could no longer keep from my mind memories of that strange dream of mine; similarly the odd sensations I had felt on contact with or in close

proximity to the yellow medallion of gold and obscure alloys.

Then there was the simple, quite definite fact — bolstered both by the judge and the widow Bridgeman alike, and by McCauley the Mountie — that a freakish five-year cycle of strange excitement, morbid worship and curious cult activity *did* actually exist in these parts. And dwelling on thoughts such as these, I found myself wondering once again just what had happened here twenty years gone, that its echoes should so involve me here and now.

Patently it had not been — could not possibly have been — as Mrs. Bridgeman "remembered" it. And yet, apart from her previous nervousness and one or two forgivable lapses under emotional stress since then, she had seemed to me to be as normal as most women....

Or had she?

I found myself in two minds. What of this fantastic immunity of hers to sub-zero temperatures? Even now she sat there, peering out into the falling snow, pale and distant and impervious still to the frost that rimed her forehead and dusted her clothes, perfectly comfortable despite the fact that she had once again shed her heavy parka. No, I was wrong, and it amazed me that I had fooled myself for so long. There was very little of normalcy about this woman. She had known — *something.* Some experience to set her both mentally and physically aside from mundane mankind.

But could that experience possibly have been the horror she "remembered?" Even then I could not quite bring myself to believe.

And yet...what of that shape we had stumbled across in the snow, that deep imprint as of a huge webbed foot? My mind flashed back to our first night out from Navissa, when I had dreamed of a colossal shape in the sky, a shape with carmine stars for eyes!

— But this was no good. Why! — here I was, nervous as a cat, starting at the slightest flurry of snow out there beyond the heavy branches. I laughed at my own fancies, albeit shakily, because just for a second as I had turned from the bright fire I had imagined that a shadow moved out in the snow, a furtive figure that shifted just beyond my periphery of vision.

"I saw you jump, Mr. Lawton," my companion suddenly spoke up. "Did you see something?"

"I don't think so," I briskly answered, my voice louder than necessary. "Just a shadow in the snow."

"He has been there for five minutes now. We are under observation!"

"What? You mean there's

someone out there?"

"Yes, one of His worshipers, I imagine, sent by the others to see what we're up to. We're outsiders, you know. But I don't think they'll try to do us any harm. Kirby would never allow that."

She was right. Suddenly I saw him, limned darkly against the white background as the whirling snow flurried to one side. Eskimo or Indian, I could not tell which, but I believe his face was impassive. He was merely — watching.

From that time on the storm strengthened, with the wind building up to a steady blast that drove the snow through the trees in an impenetrable icy wall. Behind my barrier of branches and snow we were comfortable enough, for I had extended the shelter until its wall lay open only in a narrow gap to the south; the wind was from the north. The snow on the outside of the shelter had long since formed a frozen crust, so that no wind came through, and the ice-stiffened branches of the surrounding trees gave protection from above. My fire blazed and roared in subdued imitation of the wind, for I had braved half a dozen brief excursions beyond the shelter to bring back armfuls of fallen branches. Their trimmed ends burning, Indian fashion, where they met like the spokes of a wheel to form the center of the fire, these branches now warmed our small enclosure and gave it light. They had burned thus all through the afternoon and into the night.

It was about 10:00 p.m., pitch-black beyond the wall of the shelter and still snowing hard, when we bacame aware of our second visitor; the first had silently left us some hours earlier. Mrs. Bridgeman saw him first, grabbing my elbow so that I started to my feet and turned toward the open end of our sanctuary. There, framed in the firelight, white with snow from head to foot, stood a man.

A white man, he came forward shaking the snow from his clothes. He paused before the fire and tipped back the hood of his fur jacket, then shed his gloves and held his hands out to the flames. His eyebrows were black, meeting across his nose. He was very tall. After a while, ignoring me, he turned to Mrs. Bridgeman. He had a strong New England accent when he said, "It is Kirby's wish that you go back to Navissa. He does not want you to be hurt. He says you should return now to Navissa — both of you — and that you should then go home. He knows everything now. He knows why he is here, and he wants to stay. His destiny is the glory of the spaces between the worlds, the knowledge and mysteries of the Ancient Ones who were

here before man, godship over the Icy winds of Earth and space with his Lord and Master. You have had him for almost twenty years. Now he wants to be free."

I was on the point of questioning his authority and tone when Mrs. Bridgeman cut me short. "Free? What kind of freedom? To stay here in the ice; to wander the icy wastes until any attempt to return to the world of men would mean certain death? To learn the alien lore of monsters spawned in black pits beyond time and space?"

Her voice rose hysterically. "To know no woman's love but sate his lust with strangers, leaving them for dead and worse in a manner which *only his loathsome father could ever teach him?*"

The stranger lifted his hand in sudden anger. "You dare to speak of Him like —" I sprang between them, but it was immediately apparent that I was not needed.

The change in Mrs. Bridgeman was almost frightening. She had been near to hysterics only seconds ago; now her eyes blazed with anger in her white face, and she stood so straight and regal as to make our unknown visitor draw back, his raised arm falling quickly to his side.

"Do *I* dare?" Her voice was as chill as the wind. "I am Kirby's mother! Yes, I dare — but what *you* have dared...! You would raise your hand to me?"

"I...it was only...I was angry." The man stumbled over his words before finding his former composure. "But all this makes no difference. Stay if you wish; you will not be able to enter the area of the ceremonies, for there will be a watch out. If you did get by the watch unseen — then the result would be upon your own heads. On the other hand, if you go back now, I can promise you fair weather all the way to Navissa. But only if you go now, at once."

My white-faced companion frowned and turned away to stare at the dying fire.

No doubt believing that she was weakening, the stranger offered his final inducement: "Think, Mrs. Bridgeman, and think well. There can only be one conclusion, one end, if you stay here — for you have looked upon Ithaqua!"

She turned back to him, desperate questions spilling from her lips. "Must we go tonight? May I not see my son just once? Will he be —?"

"He will not be harmed." She was cut off. "His destiny is — *great!* Yes, you must go tonight; he does not wish to see you, and there is so little —" he paused, almost visibly biting his tongue, but it seemed that Mrs. Bridgeman had not noticed his gaffe. Plainly he had

been about to say "there is so little time."

My companion sighed and her shoulders slumped. "If I agree — we will need fair weather. That can be...arranged?"

The visitor eagerly nodded (though to me the idea that he might somehow contrive to control the weather seemed utterly ridiculous) and answered, "From now until midnight, the snow will lessen, the winds will die away. After that —" he shrugged. "But you will be well away from here before then."

She nodded, apparently in defeat. "Then we'll go. We need only sufficient time to break camp. A few minutes. But —"

"No buts, Mrs. Bridgeman. There was a Mountie here. He did not want to go away either. Now —" again he shrugged, the movement of his shoulders speaking volumes.

"McCauley!" I gasped.

"That was not the Mountie's name," he answered me, "but whoever he was, he too was looking for this lady's son." He was obviously talking about some other Mountie from Fir Valley camp, and I remembered McCauley having mentioned another policeman who set out to search the wastes at the same time as he himself had headed for Stillwater.

"What have you done to him, to this man?" I asked.

He ignored me and, pulling on his gloves, again addressed Mrs. Bridgeman: "I will wait until you go." He pulled the hood of his jacket over his head, than stepped back out into the snow.

The conversation, what little there had been, had completely astounded me. In fact my astonishment had grown apace with what I had heard. Quite apart from openly admitting to what could only be murder, our strange visitor had agreed with — indeed, if my ears had not deceived me, he had *confirmed* — the wildest possible nightmares, horrors which until now, so far as I was aware or concerned, had only manifested themselves in the works of Samuel Bridgeman and others who had worked the same vein before him, and in the disturbed imagination of his widow. Surely this must be the final, utmost proof positive of the effect of the morbid five-year cycle on the minds of men? Could it be anything else?

Finally I turned to the widow to ask, "Are we actually going back to Navissa, after all your efforts? And now, when we're so close?"

First glancing cautiously out into the falling snow, she hurriedly shook her head, putting a warning finger to her lips. No, it was as I had suspected; her almost docile concurrence, following that blazing, regal display of defiance, had

merely been a ruse. She in no way intended to desert her son, whether he wished it or not. "Quickly — let's get packed up," she whispered. "He was right. The ceremony is tonight, it must be, and we haven't much time."

IV

From then on my mind was given little time to dwell on anything; I simply followed Mrs. Bridgeman's directions to the letter, questioning nothing. In any case it was obvious that her game must now be played to outwit the enemy (I had come to think of the strange worshipers as "the enemy") not to physically defeat them or talk them down. That was plainly out of the question. If indeed they had resorted to murder in order to do whatever they intended to do, they would surely not let a mere woman stop them now.

So it was that when we set off south aboard the snow-cat, in a direction roughly that of Navissa, I knew that it would not be long before we were doubling back on our tracks. And sure enough, within the half hour, at about 11:00 p.m., as we came over a low hill in the then very light snow, there Mrs. Bridgeman ordered a wide swing to the west.

We held this westward course for ten more minutes, then turned sharply to our right flank, bringing the snow-cat once again onto a northerly course. For a further twenty minutes we drove through the light snow, which, now that it had the slackening north wind behind it, stung a little on my face. Then, again at Mrs. Bridgeman's direction, we climbed a thinly wooded slope to fetch a halt at the top not twenty minutes distant from our starting point. At the speed we had traveled, (and given that the enemy had no machine comparable with our snow-cat) we could not possibly have been followed; and here, sheltered by the thin trees and the still-lightly falling snow, we should be quite invisible to the enemy somewhere to our front.

Now, while we paused for a moment, I once more found questions forming in my mind for which I had no answers, and I had no sooner decided to voice them than my pale companion pointed suddenly out through the thin branches of the trees on the summit of the hill in the direction of a great black forested area some half mile to the north.

It was that same forest into which the enemy had vanished earlier in the day when we had been trailing them. Now at its four cardinal points, up sprang great fires of leaping red flame; and now too, coming to us on the wings of the north wind, faint and uneven

we heard massed voices raised in a chilling ritual — the Rites of Ithaqua:

"Ia! Ia! — Ithaqua! Ithaqua!
Ai! Ai! Ai! — Ithaqua!
Ce-fyak vulg-t'uhm —
Ithaqua fhtagn!
Ugh! — Ia! Ia! — Ai! Ai! Ai!"

Again and again, repeatedly the wind carried that utterly alien chorus to our ears, and inside me it seemed suddenly that my blood froze. It was not only this abhorrent chanting with its guttural tones, but also the *precision* of the — singing? — and the obvious familiarity of the voices with the song. This was no blind, parrotlike repetition of obscure vocal forms but a combination of a hundred or more perfectly synchronized voices whose soul-rending interpretation of a hideous alien liturgy had transformed it into this present awesome cacophony — a cacophony whose horror might indeed breach the voids between the worlds! Suddenly I knew that if there was an Ithaqua, then he must surely hear and answer the voices of his worshipers.

"Very little time now," my companion muttered, more to herself than to me "The place of the ceremony must be central in that forest — and that's where Kirby is!"

I stared hard through the snow, which again was beginning to fall heavier, seeing that the nearest and most southerly of the four fires blazed some distance to the northeast of our position. The westerly fire was about half a mile southwest of us.

"If we head directly between those two fires," I said, "entering the woods and heading straight for the most northerly fire, on the far side, then we should come pretty close to the center of the forest. We can take the snow-cat to the edge of the trees, but from there we must go on foot. If we can grab Kirby and make a run for it — well, perhaps the cat can take three, at a push."

"Yes," she answered, "it's worth a try. If the worst comes to the worst...then at least I'll know what the end of it was..."

With that I started up the cat's motor again, thankful that the wind was in our favor and knowing that under cover of the continuous chanting we stood a fair chance of driving right to the edge of the forest without being heard.

As we headed out across the white expanse of snow to the forest's edge, I could see in the heavens the glow of the fires reflected from the base of towering, strangely roiling nimbostratus. I knew then, instinctively, that we were in for a storm to end all storms.

At the edge of the forest,

undetected so far, we dismounted and left the snow-cat hidden in the lower branches of a great pine, making our way on foot through the forest's dark depths.

The going was of necessity very slow, and of course we dared show no light, but having progressed only a few hundred yards, we found that we could see in the distance the fires of individual torches, and the chanting came much louder and clearer. If there were guards, then we must have passed them by without attracting attention. The chanting was tinged now with a certain hysteria, a frenzy that built steadily toward a crescendo, charging the frosty air with unseen and menacing energies.

Abruptly, we came to the perimeter of a great cleared area where the trees had been cut down to be built into a huge platform in the center. All about this platform a mongrel congregation of fur and parka-clad men and women stood, their faces showing ruddy and wild-eyed in the light of numerous torches. There were Eskimos, Indians, Negroes and whites — people from backgrounds as varied as their colors and races — over one hundred and fifty of them at a guess.

The time by then was rapidly approaching midnight, and the deafening, dreadful chanting had now reached such an intensity as to make any increase seem almost impossible. Nevertheless there *was* an increase, at which, with one final convulsive shriek, the entire crowd about the pyramidal platform prostrated themselves face-down in the snow — all bar one!

"Kirby!" I heard Mrs. Bridgeman gasp, as that one upright man, proud and straight-backed, naked except for his trousers, commenced a slow and measured climb up the log steps of the platform.

"Kirby!" She shouted his name this time, starting forward and avoiding the arms I held out to restrain her.

"He comes! He comes!" The cry went out in a hiss of rapture from one hundred and fifty throats — drowning Lucille Bridgeman's shout — and suddenly I felt the expectancy in the air.

The prostrate figures were silent now, waiting; the slight wind had disappeared; the snow no longer fell. Only Mrs. Bridgeman's running figure disturbed the stillness, that and the flickering of torches where they stood up from the snow; only her feet on the ice-crusted surface broke the silence.

Kirby had reached the top of the pyramid, and his mother was running between the outermost of the encircling, prostrate figures when it happened. She stopped suddenly and cast a terrified glance

at the night sky, then lifted a hand to her open mouth. I, too, looked up, craning my neck to see — and something moved high in the roiling clouds!

"He comes! He comes!" The vast sigh went up again.

Many things happened then, all in the space of a few seconds, comprising a total and a culmination beyond belief. And still I pray that what I heard and saw at that time, that everything I experienced, was an illusion engendered of too close a proximity to the mass lunacy of those who obey the call of the five-year cycle.

How best to describe it?

I remember running forward a few paces, into the clearing proper, before my eyes followed Mrs. Bridgeman's gaze to the boiling heavens where at first I saw nothing but the madly whirling clouds. I recall, however, a picture in my memory of the man called Kirby standing wide-legged atop the great pyramid of logs, his arms and hands reaching in a gesture of expectancy or welcome up and outwards, his hair streaming in a wind which sprang up suddenly *from above* to blow slantingly down from the skies. And then there is the vision that burns even now in my mind's eye of a *darkness* that fell of the clouds like a black meteorite, a darkness grotesquely shaped like a man with carmine stars for eyes in its bloated blot of a head, and my ears still ring to the pealing screams of mortal fear and loathing that went up in that same instant from the poor, paralyzed woman who now saw and recognized the horror from the skies.

The Beast-God came striding down the wind, descending more slowly now than at first but still speeding like some great bird of prey to earth, its fantastic splay-footed strides carrying it as if down some giant, winding, invisible staircase straight to the waiting figure atop the pyramid, until the huge black head turned and, from high above the trees, the thing called the Wind-Walker saw the hysterically screaming woman where she stood amid the prostrate forms of its worshipers — saw and *knew* her!

In midair the Being came to an abrupt, impossible halt — and then the great carmine eyes grew larger still, and the blackly outlined arms lifted to the skies in what was clearly an attitude of rage! One monstrous hand reached to the rushing clouds, and through them, to emerge but a split second later and hurl something huge and round to earth. Still Mrs. Bridgeman screamed — loud, clear and horrifically — as the unerringly hurled thing smashed down upon her with a roar of tortured air, flattening her instantly to the frozen ground and splintering into

a mad bomb burst of exploding shards of — ice!

The scene about the log pyramid at that hellish moment must have been chaos. I myself was thrown in the rush of pressured air back into the trees, but in the next moment when I looked out again upon the clearing, all I could see was...blood!

The ice-torn, mangled bodies of a wide segment of worshipers were still tumbling outward from the blasted area where Mrs. Bridgeman had stood — a number of bloodied bodies still fell, lazily almost, like red leaves through the howling air; logs were beginning to burst outwards from the base of the pyramid where flying chunks of ice had crashed with the force of grenades.

Nor was Ithaqua finished!

It seemed almost as if I could read this horror's thoughts as it towered raging in the sky: *Were these not His worshipers? — and had they not betrayed their faith in this matter, which was to have been His first meeting with His son on Earth? Well, they would pay for this error, for allowing this Daughter of Man, the mother of His son, to interfere with the ceremony!*

In the space of a few more seconds huge balls of ice were flung to earth like a scattering of hailstones — but with far more devastating effect. When the last of them had scattered its ice-knife shards far and wide about the clearing, the snow was red with spouting blood; the screams of the torn and dying rose even above the howling devil-wind that Ithaqua had brought with Him from the star-spaces. The trees bent outward now from the clearing with the fury of that fiendish storm, and logs snapped and popped like matchsticks from the base of the platform at the crimson clearing's center.

But a change had taken place in the attitude of the lone figure standing wild and wind-blown at the top of the tottering pyramid.

While the gigantic, anthropomorphic figure in the sky had raged and ravaged, raining down death and destruction in the form of ice-globes frozen in his hands and snatched down out of the heavens, so the man-God-child, now grown to strange adulthood, had watched from his vantage point above the clearing all that transpired. He had seen his mother ruthlessly crushed to a raw, red pulp; he had watched the demoniac destruction of many, perhaps all of those deluded followers of his monstrous father. Still, in a dazed bewilderment, he gazed down upon the awful aftermath in the clearing — and then he laid back his head and screamed in a composite agony of frustration, horror, despair and

rapidly waxing rage!

And in that monumental agony his hellish heritage told. For all the winds screamed with him, roaring, howling, shrieking in a circular chase about the platform that lifted logs and tossed them as twigs in a whirlpool round and about in an impossible spiraling whirl. Even the clouds above rushed and clashed the faster for Kirby's rage, until at last his Father knew the anger of His son for what it was — but did He understand?

Down through the sky the Wind-Walker came again, striding on great webbed feet through the currents of crazed air, arms reaching as a father reaches for his son —

— And at last, battered and bruised as I was and half unconscious from the wind's screaming and buffeting, I saw that which proved to me beyond all else that I had indeed succumbed to the five-year cycle of legend-inspired lunacy and mass hysteria.

For as the Ancient One descended, so His son rose up to meet Him — Kirby, racing up the wind in sure-footed bounds and leaps, roaring with a hurricane voice that tore the sky asunder and blasted the clouds back across the heavens in panic flight — Kirby, expanding, exploding outward until his outlilne, limned against the frightened sky, became as great as that of his alien Sire — Kirby, Son of Ithaqua, whose clawing hands now reached in a raging blood-lust, whose snarling, bestial, darkening features demanded revenge!

For a moment, perhaps astounded, the Wind-Walker stood off — and there were two darkly towering figures in that tortured sky, two great heads in which twin pairs of carmine stars glared — and these figures rushed suddenly together in such a display of aerial fury that for a moment I could make out nothing of the battle but the flash of lightning and roar of thunder.

I shook my head and wiped the frost and frozen blood droplets from my forehead, and when next I dared look at the sky, I could see only the fleeing clouds madly racing away — the clouds and high, high above them, two dark dots that fought and tore and dwindled against a familiar but now leering background of stars and constellations...

Almost twenty-four hours have passed. How I lived through the horrors of last night I shall never know; but I did, and physically unscathed, though I fear that my mind may be permanently damaged. If I attempt to rationalize the thing, then I can say that there was a storm of tremendous and

devastating fury, during the course of which I lost my mind. I can say, too, that Mrs. Bridgeman is lost in the snow, even that she must now be dead despite her amazing invulnerability to the cold. But of the rest...?

And on the other hand, if I forego all rationalizations and listen only to the little winds whispering among themselves behind my flimsy shelter...? Can I deny my own senses?

I remember only snatches of what followed the awful carnage and the onset of the aerial battle — my return to the snow-cat and how that machine broke down less than half an hour later in a blinding snowstorm; my frozen, stumbling fight against great white drifts with various items of equipment dragging me down; my bruising fall into a frozen hole in the snow whose *outlines* sent me in a renewed frenzy of gibbering terror across the wastes — until, exhausted, I collapsed here between these sheltering trees. I remember knowing that if I remained still where I had fallen, then I must die; and I recall the slow agony of setting up my shelter, packing the walls solid and lighting the stove. There is nothing more, however, until I awaken around noon.

The cold had roused me. The stove had long since burned itself out, but empty soup cans told me that somehow I had managed to feed myself before giving in to my absolute fatigue. I opened the reservoir of fuel in the stove's body and fired it again, once more attending to my hunger before drying out and warming my clothes item by item. Then, fortified and almost warm, heartened by a slight rise in the outside temperature, I set about the strengthening of this my last refuge; for I knew by then that this was as far as I could hope to go.

At about 4:00 p.m. the sky told me that soon it must storm again, and it was then that I thought to search out the snow-cat and fetch precious fuel for my stove. I almost lost myself when the snow began to fall again, but by 6:00 p.m. I was back in my shelter having recovered almost a gallon of fuel from the crippled cat. I had spent at least fifteen futile minutes trying to re-start the vehicle, which still lies where I found it less than half a mile from my refuge. It was then, knowing that I could live only a few days more at the outside, that I began to write this record. This is no mere foreboding, this grimly leering doom from which there can be no escape. I have given it some thought: I am too far from Navissa to stand even the slightest chance of making it on foot. I have food and fuel for three days at the most. Here...I can live for a few days

more, and perhaps someone will find me. Outside, in some futile attempt to reach Navissa in the coming storm...I might last a day or even two, but I could never hope to cover all those miles in the snow.

It is about four in the morning. My wrist watch has stopped and I can no longer tell the time accurately. The storm, which I mistakenly thought had passed me by some miles to the north, has started outside. It was the roaring of the wind that roused me. I must have fallen asleep at my writing about midnight.

This is strange: the wind howls and roars, but through an opening in my canvas I can see the snow falling *steadily* against the black of the night, not hurried and hustled by the wind! And my shelter is too steady; it does not tremble in the gale. What does this mean?

I have discovered the truth. I am betrayed by the golden medallion which, when I discovered the howling thing still in my pocket, I hurled out into a drift. There it lies now, outside in the snow, shrieking and screaming with the eternal crying of the winds that roar between the worlds.

To leave my shelter now is certain death. And to stay...?

I must be quick with this, for He has come! Called by the demon howling of the medallion, He is here. No illusion this, no figment of my imagination but hideous fact. *He squats without, even now!*

I dare not look out into His great eyes; I do not know what I might see in those carmine depths. But I do know now how I will die. It will be quick.

All is silence now. The falling snow muffles all. The black thing waits outside like a huge hunched blot on the snow. The temperature falls, drops, plummets. I cannot get close enough to my stove. This is how I am to pass from the world of the living, in the icy tomb of my tent, for I have gazed upon Ithaqua!

It is the end...frost forms on my brow...my lips crack...my blood freezes...I cannot breathe the air...my fingers are as white as the snow...the cold....

NAVISSA DAILY

The Snows Claim a Fresh Victim!

Just before the Christmas season, bad news has come out of Fir Valley camp where members of the Royal Canadian North-West Mounted Police have winter residence. During the recent lull in the weather, Constables McCauley and Sterling have been out in the wastes north of Navissa searching for traces of their former companion, Constable Jeffrey, who

disappeared on routine investigations in October. The Mounties found no trace of constable Jeffrey, but they did discover the body of Mr. David Lawton, an American meteorologist, who also disappeared into the snow in October. Mr. Lawton, accompanied by a Mrs. Lucille Bridgeman (still missing), set out at that time in search of one Kirby Bridgeman, the lady's son. It was believed that this young man had gone into the wastes with a party of Eskimos and Indians, though no trace of this party has since been found. The recovery of Mr. Lawton's body will have to wait until the spring thaw; Constabes McCauley and Sterling report that the body is frozen solid in a great block of clear ice which also incloses a canvas shelter and bivouac. The detailed report mentions that the eyes of the corpse are open and staring, as though the freezing took place with great rapidity....

NELSON RECORDER
for Christmas Eve:
A Christmas Horror!

Carol singers in the High Hill quarter of Nelson were astounded and horrified when, at 11:00 p.m., the frozen body of a young man crashed out of the upper branches of a tree in the grounds of No. 10 Church Street where they were caroling. Such was the force of its fall that the icy, naked figure brought down many branches with it. At least two of the witnesses state that the horribly mauled and mangled youth — whose uncommonly large and strangely webbed feet may help to identify him — fell not out of the tree but through it, as from the sky! Investigations are continuing....

ISAAC ASIMOV

Science

THE SMELL OF ELECTRICITY

Not long ago, I had occasion to drive through the town of Fulton, New York, on my way to Oswego where I was scheduled to give a talk. And there I stopped my car and cried out, "Chocolate!" — For chocolate is a mad passion of mine.

It seems there is a chocolate factory in the town, and it took a while for my wife to persuade me to put the car in gear again and start driving, before my eager snuffling made me too oxygen-drunk to be trusted at the wheel.

I was still under the spell of the memory at dinner that night, which I shared with a few students and professors. I told them of my experience and, recalling another mad passion of mine, said, "Yes, indeed, I am quite sure that if there were a heaven and if I were judged worthy of entrance, my reward for a well-spent life would be chocolate-covered girls."

At least one of the professors present was struck by the thought for he kept muttering, "Chocolate-covered girls! Hmmm!" for the rest of the evening. Perhaps he was trying to assess what a red-head dipped in semi-sweet would be like.

But if no other odor is quite that of chocolate (at least to me) all odors are evocative. In my

incarnation as professional chemist, I was accustomed to odors of quite another variety, and while most were not pleasant in themselves, they bring back delightful memories on every one of the now-very-rare times (alas!) that I walk into a chem lab.

So let's talk about smells.

In the middle and late 1700s, scientists were fascinated by electricity. They stored electric charges in Leyden jars, then discharged them, watched the sparks, listened to the crackles, felt the shocks, and had as much fun as you and I would have at a carnival. And sometimes, they detected a funny smell that seemed characteristic of such apparatus.

The smell was specifically referred to for the first time (as far as we know) in 1785 by a Dutch physicist, Martin Van Marum, who built giant friction machines out of which to draw nice, fat sparks.

It wasn't till 1839, however, that someone, catching the smell, thought of it not as just the smell of electricity, but as a definite chemical compound. That someone was a German chemist, Christian Friedrich Schonbein, who had the two necessary ingredients in his laboratory, electrical equipment and poor ventilation.

By 1839, the element chlorine had been discovered, and the smell of electricity was somewhat like chlorine so that Schonbein couldn't help but think he had a chlorine-like substance, perhaps chlorine in combination with other elements. Whatever it was, he named the substance "ozone" from the Greek "ozo" meaning "I smell."

One thing one might do would be to try to find out under what kind of chemical conditions the smell appeared. In other words, suppose the electrical equipment was sparkling clean and was surrounded by pure nitrogen, or pure hydrogen, and electric sparks were discharged through the gas. Would the smell appear? (Answer: No.)

In 1845, two Swiss scientists, a chemist named Jean Charles Gallisard de Marignac and a physicist named Auguste Arthur de la Rive, passed pure oxygen through an electric discharge and, behold, the smell appeared. Whatever ozone might be, it had to be a form of oxygen since there was nothing else out of which it could be formed.

Trying to work out what the form of oxygen might be was a problem. One trouble was that chemists, through the first half of the 1800s, were not sure about the manner in which atoms grouped together to form molecules. Nowadays, we know that ordinary oxygen is made up of molecules that each contain two oxygen atoms, so that "molecular

oxygen," as it occurs in the atmosphere, for instance, is written O_2. The evidence for that, however, wasn't straightened out and made plain till 1858, when the Italian chemist, Stanislao Cannizzaro, finally showed how to determine molecular weights from vapor densities.

There was no way at that time of collecting enough pure ozone to measure its density, but there were other lines of attack. Gases diffuse. Their molecules blunder their way past other molecules and even through tiny holes in apparently solid materials, so that if you uncork a bottle of strongly-smelling material at one end of the room, you will sooner or later smell it at the other end even if there is, let us say, a cardboard partition between.

The speed of diffusion is inversely proportional to molecular weight. That is, a more massive molecule moves more slowly than a less massive molecule. That makes sense, of course, but the trick is to determine just exactly how much more slowly the molecules move as the mass increases.

In 1834, the Scottish chemist, Thomas Graham, working with molecules whose comparative masses he felt reasonably certain he knew made careful measurements and decided that the change varied as the square root of the mass. In other words, if a particular molecule moved at a certain rate, one that was four times as heavy would move two times as slowly (or one-half as fast, if you prefer); one that was nine times as heavy would move three times as slowly and so on.

This relationship (called "Graham's Law") was found to work very well and could be used with confidence once the structure of molecules was straightened out. For instance, one could study the rate at which ozone diffused. For that, one didn't have to collect quantities of pure material; one could use merely traces and note when some detectable chemical property could be found at some given distance from the starting point.

In 1868, the chemist J. Louis Soret ran experiments designed to compare the rate of diffusion of ozone with that of carbon dioxide and chlorine. It turned out that ozone diffused about 5 percent more slowly than carbon dioxide and about 22 percent faster than chlorine. The molecular weights of carbon dioxide and chlorine (44 and 71, respectively) were known, and it could therefore be calculated that ozone had a molecular weight of 48. Since the oxygen atom had a weight of 16, it was clear that ozone must be made up of three-atom molecules. Whereas ordinary oxygen is O_2, ozone is O_3.

In 1922, the German chemist, George Maria Schwab, produced pure ozone and measured its density, which confirmed the 0_3 formula.

Ozone is not merely a form of oxygen. The two are distinctly different substances that just happen each to be made up of oxygen atoms exclusively.

We are not surprised that carbon dioxide (CO_2) is a compound that differs radically from carbon monoxide (CO), even though the only difference is an extra oxygen atom in the molecule of the former. Substitute an oxygen atom for the carbon atom in each and we have ozone (OO_2) and oxygen (OO).

The difference can be seen in many ways. Oxygen is a colorless gas that can be made to condense, at very low temperatures, into a pale blue liquid, and then to freeze, at still lower temperatures, into a darker blue solid. Ozone is a pale blue gas that can be made to condense into a deep blue liquid and to freeze into a solid so deeply violet in color as to be virtually black.

Both oxygen gas and ozone gas contain the same number of molecules in a given volume. The fact, however, that the individual ozone molecule has three oxygen atoms to two for the oxygen molecule, makes the ozone gas half again as dense as oxygen gas. A liter of oxygen gas under ordinary atomospheric conditions weighs 1.43 grams; a liter of ozone gas under the same conditions weighs 2.14 grams.

The greater density persists in the liquid form. At its boiling point, the density of liquid oxygen is 1.142 grams per milliliter (or 1142 grams per liter) which is about 800 times as dense as the gas. At the same temperature, liquid ozone had a density of 1.571 grams per milliliter, which is about 750 times as dense as the gas. (The three-atom molecules can't pack together quite as tightly in liquid form as the two-atom molecules can)

All things being equal, substances with large massive molecules tend to have higher boiling points and freezing points than those with small molecules.

Liquid oxygen freezes to the solid form at -218.8 C. or 54.4 degrees above the absolute zero — which we can write as 54.4 K — and boils at 90.2 K. Liquid ozone, however, with its larger molecule, freezes at 80.5 K. and boiles at 161.3 K.

Ozone is also considerably more soluble in water than oxygen is. At 0 C. a liter of water will dissolve 4.9 cubic centimeters of oxygen but will dissolve 49 centimeters of ozone, just ten times as much of the latter.

You might think that liquid oxygen and liquid ozone, both consisting of oxygen atoms only, would be at least enough alike to mix freely, but that

is not so. In the liquid oxygen temperature range, one part of liquid oxygen will mix with three parts of liquid ozones, and vice versa. However, if you were to mix equal proportion of liquid oxygen and liquid ozone and were to stir well, you would end with two separate liquids with a clear dividing line. The top liquid, a deep blue in color, will be chiefly liquid oxygen, with some liquid ozone dissolved in it. The bottom liquid, nearly black, will be chiefly liquid ozone with some liquid oxygen dissolved in it.

Oxygen has no odor. It can't have. We breathe it constantly; we are thoroughly saturated with it. Whatever chemical changes in the inner linings of our noses produce the sensation of odor, none can take place with oxygen since any possible reaction has already taken place at the very beginning of the smell-sensation in the individual. If we could imagine ourselves as somehow living without oxygen at all and with all gaseous oxygen removed from our body and if we were *then* to breath a bit of oxygen, we should undoubtedly receive the sensation of a pronounced and, probably, unpleasant smell.

Well, ozone has such a smell, and a strong one, too. In fact, ozone can be just barely detected by smell where there is as little as 0.01 parts per million (ppm) in air, provided no other smells are competing.

Ozone is highly poisonous, too (as opposed to oxygen which is immediately and continually essential to life). A concentration of 0.1 ppm in air is the maximum allowable for eight hours continual exposure. Ozone is about a hundred times as poisonous as carbon monoxide.

Ozone formation from oxygen requires an input of energy. The pair of oxygen atoms forming molecular oxygen occupy a stable position with respect to each other. Left to themselves under ordinary conditions, oxygen molecules jiggle about and bounce off each other, but in doing so, they neither join together as a double molecule or split apart into single atoms. To add a third oxygen atom to so comfortably married a couple is not easy. One way of accomplishing it is by adding energy to the system in the form of an electric discharge — the method by which ozone was first discovered.

Another way is by exposing oxygen to light. Not ordinary light, which isn't energetic enough, but ultraviolet light. If oxygen in a quartz container (quartz allows ultraviolet light to pass through itself, where ordinary glass does not) is exposed to ultraviolet, it will smell of ozone when liberated. Then, too, if liquid oxygen is exposed to ultraviolet light (an experiment first carried out in 1907), it grows steadily bluer as liquid ozone if formed.

What probably happens in such cases is that the energy of the electrical discharge, or of the ultraviolet radiation, will split an occasional oxygen molecule in two, forming free oxygen atoms ("atomic oxygen"). If only atomic oxygen were then present, the atoms would collide and recombine into oxygen molecules, liberating the energy that had gone into the splitting of that molecule (though the energy liberated might well be different in form from that which entered the system to begin with).

However, relatively few of the molecules are split, so that the free oxygen atoms in their blundering are overwhelmingly likely to strike intact oxygen molecules. The chemical activity of a free oxygen atom is extremely high to begin with, and with the added energy of the splitting agent, the atom can attach itself to the oxygen molecule to form ozone.

If an atom adds on to a molecule, thanks to an imput of energy, we may expect that it will eventually drop off again with the re-liberation of that energy (perhaps in a different form). The more difficulty there is in adding that atom, the greater the ease with which it will drop off.

Ozone, which is formed from oxygen with considerable difficulty, will convert back into oxygen spontaneously with the encouragement of a little heat. The heat causes the ozone molecule to vibrate more energetically, and the third atom shakes off. That liberates more energy, which shakes the remaining molecules even more vigorously, producing more breakdowns without the liberated energy ever appearing in a form concentrated enough to allow the re-formation of ozone. Once begun, the process of decomposing the ozone molecule proceeds to completion rapidly. In fact, if care is not taken, the process of decomposition becomes so rapid that the ozone explodes.

Schonbein, who discovered ozone, found that if oxygen containing ozone was passed through a heated tube, it emerged as pure oxygen. That was one of the early experiments that confirmed that ozone was made up of oxygen atoms only.

When ozone decomposes to liberate oxygen atoms, and when nothing is present but ozone and, possibly, oxygen, those atoms, lacking the drive of concentrated energy, cannot re-attack the oxygen molecules and can do nothing more than find each other and form oxygen molecules.

Even at room temperature, ozone molecules occasionally break down, but in such small proportions that the occasional union of free oxygen atoms does not deliver much heat. Such heat as is delivered appears at such a low rate that there is time for it to be radiated away into the

environment as quickly as delivered and the temperature does not rise. Therefore, although room temperature ozone may very slowly break down, it never does this explosively if pure. Liquid ozone, if pure, will break down so slowly at its low temperature that it might be considered as practically stable.

It may be, however, that there is present some impurity that is more readily attacked by free oxygen atoms than the oxygen molecule itself is. The presence of such substances in ozone increases its instability.

Imagine ozone containing small quantities of molecules made up, at least in part, of carbon and hydrogen atoms. (This is characteristic of any organic molecule of the type that is, or was, part of living tissue.)

The occasional free oxygen atom produced by spontaneous ozone breakdown even at low temperatures combines readily with carbon or hydrogen atoms and delivers considerable heat. The temperature rises more rapidly, therefore, in the presence of organic molecules than in their absence, breakdown accelerates and quickly reaches the pitch of explosion. Naturally, the greater the concentration of ozone the more likely this is to happen, so that ozone in high concentration must be treated very carefully, kept very free of impurities other than oxygen, and maintained at a reasonably low temperature. Otherwise, it becomes an explosion hazard.

It might seem rather surprising that free oxygen, as it occurs in the atmosphere, does as little damage as it does. Oxygen atoms combine rapidly with most other atoms, including, particularly, the carbon and hydrogen atoms in organic molecules. Why doesn't the oxygen in the air combine instantly with all the organic matter in the world (including ourselves) and do it energetically enough to produce one great conflagration that would end with all oxygen gone and all life in ashes.

That this does not happen is entirely due to the fact that the two oxygen atoms in the oxygen molecule hold each other so tightly. As long as they are together, they are relatively harmless, and their combinations with other atoms proceeds so slowly as to be virtually non-existent.

When the temperature goes up, the oxygen molecule vibrates more and more strongly, and the bond between them weakens. There comes a point where the individual oxygen atoms will more readily combine with a carbon atom or a hydrogen atom in something organic than remain attached to its twin in the molecule. The combination of oxygen atoms with other atoms releases heat, which further raises the temperature,

further weakens the oxygen-oxygen bond and further accelerates combination of oxygen atoms with other atoms.

There is, in other words, an "ignition temperature," and once that is reached, combination with oxygen ("oxidation") continues rapidly, producing in the case of most organic materials vapors hot enough to glow. We have combustion and the appearance of fire.

The third oxygen atom of ozone is so loosely bound that it takes little or no heat to encourage it to combine elsewhere. Substances are much more likely to combine with oxygen atoms in the presence of ozone than in the presence of oxygen molecules. Ozone is, therefore, a stronger "oxidizing agent" than oxygen is.

The metal mercury, for instance, does not combine with oxygen at room temperature. It remains shining and metallic in appearance in contact with air. In the presence of ozone, however, mercury rusts and forms an oxide. Silver will rust in the presence of ozone, too, if heated a bit. There are numerous chemical reactions that won't go with oxygen, but will with ozone. The oxidizing effect of ozone can be put to use in organic chemistry. Here's how it works —

Organic molecules consist of chains or rings of carbon atoms, to each of which other atoms may be attached. Usually, each carbon atom is held to adjacent carbon atoms by virtue of sharing with each neighbor a single pair of electrons. For historical reasons, this is called a "single bond." On occasion the attachment is by way of sharing two pairs of electrons — a "double bond."

In studying the structure of organic molecules, chemists find it important to know if double bonds are present and, if so, where in the structure they are to be found. One way of determining this is to take advantage of the fact that the double bond represents a weak point in the carbon chain.

(You might think that two atoms held by a double bond are more tightly joined than when held by a single bond, but it doesn't work that way. The picture produced by the word "bond" is misleading in this respect. Four electrons crowded between two atoms pushes them farther apart than two electrons would and that makes the joining weaker.)

Oxygen itself is not a strong enough oxidizing agent to take advantage of the double-bond weak point, but ozone is. The ozone molecule can add on rapidly at the point of the double bond. All three oxygen atoms add on to form an "ozonide." (This process was first reported in 1855 by Schonbein.)

Chemists in forming ozonides use a stream of oxygen in which the concentration of ozone is no more than 6 to 8 percent in order to avoid too uncomfortably rapid a reaction. The ozonide that is formed is usually itself explosive, and so chemists don't let it hang around. They react it with water or other substances, and such a reaction divides the molecule at the point of ozone addition, a division referred to as "ozonolysis."

In place of the original molecule with its double bond, you have, in the case of a carbon chain, two smaller molecules. In the case of a carbon ring, that ring is broken and a carbon chain is formed. In either case, by studying the nature of the molecules after ozonolysis, chemists can determine the nature of the original molecule and the exact position of the double bond. Ozonolysis was used, for instance, to determine the structure of the rubber molecule and to direct the art of the chemist toward the formation of artificial rubbers on something better than a hit-and-miss basis.

Sometimes the smaller chemical compound that appears after the breakage of the chain by ozonization is more valuable than the original. It is easy, for instance, to get a compound called eugenol from plants. This is easily turned into a related compound called isoeugenol, and this can be broken down by ozonization into vanillin, the much more valuable compound that gives vanilla its flavor. This was the most important commercial ozonolysis reaction in the early decades of the 20th Century.

Since then another ozonolysis has become more important. Oleic acid, the molecules of which contain an eighteen-carbon chain, is universally found in all natural fats and oils. The molecule has a double bond right in the middle of the chain and by ozonolysis it is split into two molecules of nine carbon atoms each, which can then be used as starting materials for certain other substances with useful applications.

Ozone is similar in its chemical reactions to chlorine, since both are oxidizing agents. (In the early days of chemistry, what we call oxidation was so characteristic of oxygen that it didn't seem reasonable to think of it in connection with other substances. Oxidation, however, is brought about by the removal of electrons from the substance being oxidized, and chlorine can accomplish that task. The element fluorine can remove electrons more readily than chlorine, oxygen, or ozone, and is the strongest oxidizing agent known. In fact, fluorine can oxidize oxygen itself by taking electrons away from the oxygen atom.)

Usually colored substances, when oxidized, lose their colors. An agent

which will oxidize such substances without seriously affecting the textile material carrying them will serve as a useful "bleach." Chlorine and various chlorine-containing compounds serve as bleaches, and so does ozone.

Chlorine will also act to kill microorganisms. (It will kill us, too, if we breathe enough of it.) This killing action of chlorine is useful in the sterilization of water in swimming pools and in making a city's water supply safe (if not exactly pleasurable) to drink.

Ozonization, less common than chlorination, accomplishes the task more rapidly, and since ozone turns to oxygen in the process, it imparts no bad taste to the water.

Then, too, ozone, if added to the air of cold-storage rooms to an extent of 1 to 3 parts per million, will serve a useful purpose. The growth of bacteria and molds, already inhibited by the cold there, will be further inhibited by ozone.

The use of ozone in various purification procedures may have given rise to the thought that ozone is a particularly pure and invigorating form of oxygen in the minds of those innocent of chemistry. Ozone is sometimes used as a synonym for the clean air of the outdoors far away from the city's filth.

As a matter of fact there is some ozone in the atmosphere that surrounds us, formed there by the action of sunlight. In rural areas, it may reach a level of 0.02 to 0.03 ppm, just enough to smell if the other smells of the countryside didn't drown it out. In the cities, there is usually less ozone than that because there is less sunlight — unless there are certain chemical impurities in the air of the type that form smog. That tends to encourage ozone formation by sunlight, and concentrations as high as 0.5 ppm have been reported on smoggy days for short periods of time — a concentration definitely in the danger zone.

Putting aside the effect on human health, the presence of ozone can be troublesome because ozone adds on to double bonds in chemical chains and, in particular, to those in rubber. Ozonized rubber loses its elasticity and becomes brittle so that smog is hard on automobile tires, which must be specially treated to make them resistant to the effect.

The natural occurrence of ozone in the atmosphere becomes much more important at great heights, and I'll approach that subject from another direction next month.

Robert F. Young, one of sf's most accomplished and versatile writers, returns with a *tour de force* in which a crushingly familiar day in the life of Vic Lowery is played out against a strange and alien background. Or is it the background that's familiar?

Shakespeare of the Apes

by ROBERT F. YOUNG

Lowery wakes; it is Sunday morning. Breakfast sounds come from below, but he does not immediately arise. He lies beneath the tousled muslin sheet lackadaisically listening to the faint clatter of cookware, to tap water being drawn, to the muffled sound of Nora's footsteps on the tiled kitchen floor. The bedroom is awash with bright summer sunshine, redolent with morning's grassgreen breath.

— The walls of my prison cell are the texture of time. The door is a checkerboard of nights and days. Opposite the door, a little window looks out upon Tomorrow, but it is too high for me to see through. The furniture consists of a solitary chair and a small table. Upon the table lies a ream of writing paper; next to it, a quill pen protrudes from an inkwell that has long since gone dry —

He smells coffee. There will be eggs, Western style, and toast and bacon. He kicks back the sheet, swings his feet to the floor and feels with his toes for the slippers he stepped out of the night before. Felt-shod, he pads into the bathroom where he relieves his distended bladder and washes his face and hands. He combs back into place the straggly wisps of dark-brown hair that crawled down over his domical forehead during his dreams, checks to see whether he needs a shave. He doesn't quite, but he will very soon; he must trim his minimustache too. It is his only physical affectation and lends him an appropriate academic air.

In fauve dressing gown, he descends the carpeted stairs, walks through the large living-dining room and enters the coffee-scented kitchen. His orange juice glows in a little frosted glass that stands upon the Formica breakfast counter; he

dispatches it in three neat swallows. Behind him, Nora says, "Mom and dad'll be here right after mass."

Lowery makes no comment. Nora, who attended 5 o'clock Saturday mass, drops two slices of bread into the automatic toaster. The counter is set for two; she dishes out bacon and eggs and pours coffee. At thirty-eight, she is not nearly as drab as her disheveled hair and shapeless housecoat proclaim. Her movements reveal a natural litheness, a pleasing fullness of hip and thigh. Her hair, after the dishes are done and put away, will be combed to her shoulders in dark and breathless undulations, the waterfall tresses parting to reveal her narrow but comely face, her eyes a wild-flower blue beneath plucked black cornices of brows.

— In choosing her for my mate, I could have done far worse. It is true she is but little less insensitive, but little less materialistic than the other members of her tribe; but she is durable, even more so than her genetic coevals. The females of my native chrono-land are worn out before they are thirty. That is all right — then. But here in the past it is *comme il faut* to live with the vase long after the flowers have withered and died; thus, it is well for the vase to be sturdy.

I must include this profound observation in the text of the novel I shall never write —

Scene 2. The house faces east. In its shrinking backyard shadow, stilliform dew-diamonds glisten on the grass. Standing on the awninged patio, wearing walking shorts and gripping a 10 lb. bag of briquettes, Lowery surveys his demesne. Not far from the patio a Schwedler's maple stands. To Lowery's right, a rear door provides ancillary access to the adjoining garage that houses his Bonneville. Between the Schwedler and the patio rises the outdoor fireplace he built last summer with his own two hands. It is remarkably like the one in the backyard next door that his neighbor, Hungry Jack (the epithet is Lowery's own), built with his own two hands.

Lowery cannot start the sacred fire this early in the day, but he can and does pour forth the sacred briquettes. Several years ago on the heels of a sweltering summer, in response to some masochistic quirk, he directed his English class to write a composition entitled "How My Father Spends His Sundays." His masochism was amply appeased: 90 per cent of the fathers were of same sacerdotal stamp as he and conducted similar carbonaceous ceremonies.

There is no need for him to mow his lawn — he mowed it yesterday.

But the grass girdling the base of the Schwedler and that flanking the footing of the patio escaped the rotary blade and is both straggly and unsightly. Dutifully, he gets his trimming shears from the garage and sets to work. Next door, his neighbor, Hungry Jack, starts up his red riding mower; the Sunday silence, unnatural to begin with, absconds. Jack handles the mower as though it is a big bulldozer, sitting top-heavily on the little toy seat. One of his seven sons comes out of the house, rubbing his eyes. He begins running after the little red bulldozer. "Dad! Can I drive it? Can I?" "No!" Jack roars above the ROAR. "Get back inside and finish your cereal!"

Jack waves to Lowery as he makes the first pass. Lowery waves back, looking up from the base of the Schwedler. Seven sons...

Unlike the Parnassian Block which the Quadripartite psychosurgeons interposed between my personal unconscious and my endopsychic sphere, the subsequent electrosurgical excision by the Quadripartite techmeds of my vas deferens was a routine rather than a punitive measure. Prochronisms occasioned by cellular retro-dissemination and reassembly create only insignificant distrubances in the time flow and can safely be ignored (consider, for instance, how many CRR's are involved in installing just one political prisoner in a past cell); however, a single prochronism introduced into the evolutionary pattern of the species is capable of creating a turbulence powerful enough to divert the flow into an alternate channel. Obviously, then, no dictatorship in its right collective mind would, in imprisoning a political enemy in the past, risk his impregnating a female who preceded him on the evolutionary ladder, to say nothing of his accidentally making *enceinte* one of his own genetic ancestors.

I would not in any case have wanted seven sons. I do not even want one —

"Vic," — Nora's voice from the kitchen — "the Sunday paper's here."

Lowery finishes trimming round the base of *Acer platanoides Schwedleri*, postpones manicuring the patio footing and re-enters the house. After pouring himself a second cup of coffee, he retires with it to the living room where the *Sunday Journal* awaits him on the end table beside his fauteuil. Scene 3. The *Journal* is gaily wrapped in comics; he discards them, sits down and feasts upon the same intellectual viands that by now have been delivered to Jack's doorstep, and Tom's and Dick's and Harry's farther up the street.

After updating himself on venality, corruption, rape, murder, mayhem and the weather, he turns to the book reviews. The *Journal* devotes an entire page to them. There is a new novel by Nabokov, another trilogy by Barth. In a little box near the middle of the page is a humorous anecdote about Mark Twain. Since first giving its literary reins a shake, the *Journal* has published at least a thousand boxed anecdotes, half of them about the same literary figure. Lowery, who has read most of them, abandons this one in disgust before he is halfway through the first sentence.

— "Twainophilia" — I humbly coin the term — is a common ailment among the present-day simians. Ironically, Clemens is most admired by those who have never read him, and to those who have, much of his prestige is owing to a later American literary figure's having taken time out from the anti-impotence campaign he waged incessantly against himself via his fiction to declare ***Huckleberry Finn*** America's best book. It is true that the Sarn Regime will reserve a niche for Twain/Clemens, but it will be a lowly one indeed compared to those reserved for Nabokov and one or two other twentieth-century giants obscured in their time by that troglodytic shadow out of the past, and it will owe its existence more to nostalgia than to any genuine literary prowess.

Living myself in that omnipresent shadow, I sometimes wonder whether the Quadripartite Trubunal in imposing my sentence might not have exacted greater punishment if instead of ordering a Parnassian Block inserted between my personal unconscious and my endopsychic sphere they had instead permitted the creative flame that consumed me in my own time to consume me in this: to have let me write now with the same wild discipline with which I wrote "before" — only to see the gold I minted hopelessly outshone by the nostalgic glow emanating from that overburnished tombstone —

The roar of Jack's toy bulldozer has been superseded by the fainter roar of another 'dozer farther up the street. It nicely backgrounds the screams of children celebrating Sunday morn with bicyclic expeditions round and round the block. Lowery curses softly, casts the *Journal* aside. In the kitchen doorway, Nora peers from between her dark waterfall tresses. "Mom and Dad'll be here any minute now Vic. Don't you think you ought to change?"

Upstairs, Lowery showers, shaves, then trims his academic

mustache. He gets out a clean pair of summer slacks and a fresh short-sleeved shirt. Nora's parents pull into the driveway in their Imperial while he is tying his shoes, and he hears Nora greet them at the front door. However, he does not immediately go downstairs; instead, he steps into his study across the hall and sits down at his desk. Scene 4.

The desktop is bare save for an extension phone and an ashtray. Underneath the desk, inches from his feet, is a large cardboard box filmed with dust. In the box are a dozen notebooks filled with neat, backward-slanted script, a pair of legal pads similarly filled, a 10-page typewritten outline bearing the title "3984," two typewritten drafts, similarly entitled, the one rough, the other heavily corrected and revised to such an extent that the words contained in the additions and the insertions outnumber by far those contained in the original text. There is no fair copy.

Next to the desk, a portable Smith-Corona sits up on a metal typewriter stand. Its transparent cover is cracked in three places. Shrouding it is an aura of desuetude so thick it can be cut with a knife.

Lowery stares at the machine unseeingly. Bookshelves cover one whole wall from floor to ceiling. He lights a cigarette and blows smoke at Emma, Tom Jones and Moll Flanders; at Becky Sharpe, Jane Eyre and Lord Jim —

— Dear Mom and Dad:

A note to let you know that I am feeling fine way back here in the pages of the past. My in-laws have just arrived for the weekly tribal rite at which a burnt offering of barbecued fryers will be presided over by your son Victor. Living among the Tech Age apes was difficult at first, but I have since learned their ways and have made a place of sorts for myself in their society. I have even, as you know, married one of their number. There is a major drawback, of course, occasioned by the Parnassian Block, about which I have written you many times before. But that was to be expected. As you are aware from my previous epistles, I tried in vain during the early years of my incarceration to circumvent it; since then, however, I have pretty much accepted my role as simple-minded preceptor, instilling errata, misevaluations and misconceptions in the minds of my pupils and telling outright lies to their faces. Lest I give the impression of a state of utter misery, let me quickly add that I have learned to brachiate with passable skill and have even come to enjoy to a limited degree the common pastime of

collecting baubles on the forest floor. Well, as I have said, it is Ritual Time again; so I must terminate this latest in the long line of letters that I shall never write. Hope you are well —

Your loving son,
Victor —

"Vic," Nora calls from the foot of the stairs. "They're here."

He can procrastinate no longer. Woodenly, he descends to the living room. Scene 5. Dad's mesomorphic frame sports a double-breasted gray plaid; rail-thin Mom is clad in a powder-blue suit. Dad's cologne is a thick miasma in the room, Mom's perfume a transparent mist. As always, she makes much of Lowery, kissing him on the cheek. She regards herself as his second mother. Dad stands some distance away. At Nora's suggestion, everyone sits down, Nora between Mom and Dad on the sofa, Lowery in his fauteuil. Dad dwells at considerable length upon his relatively recent prostatectomy, then goes on to lighter topics such as the pain Mom keeps getting in her side and that Dr. Kelp says is nerves. Inevitably, the conversation works its way around to Tom, Nora's oldest brother, and Dad just happens to have Polaroid snapshots of Tom's and Barbara's three adorable children, taken just last week. Dutifully, Nora and Lowery study the polychromatic photos, Nora passing them to Lowery, Lowery letting them accumulate on his lap and then passing then back to Dad.

It is time for Dad to mention how well Tom is doing in Construction. Dad is a bricklayer, retired, and in his own day did very well in Construction himself. Witness his split-level home in the country; witness his '74 Imperial standing in the driveway. Lowery squirms in his fauteuil. Nervously Nora lights a cigarette. Dad glares at her. Dad quit smoking six years ago. Mom says, "If everybody was a bricklayer, we'd all be driving brick automobiles!" It is a favorite joke of hers, reserved for just such occasions as this.

Nora gets up and turns on TV. The 12 o'clock news has just come on. An airliner has crashed in Chile. Thus far, only 102 have been reported dead, but the figure is not final by any means and may momentarily be increased. Lowery excuses himself on the grounds that he must get the charcoal going — glowing? — and gets up and leaves the room. Behind him, he hears Mom remark, "Poor boy. Every time an airliner crashes, it brings it all back." She is referring to the airline disaster of twenty years ago in which Lowery's putative parents were numbered among the 114 dead.

Scene 6. Lowery's chef's apron is hanging in the kitchen closet. It has been laundered since the last Dum Dum he presided at, but although the grease spots and the charcoal smudges came out, the cute cliches did not (CHIEF COOK AND BOTTLE WASHER, GET IT WHILE IT'S HOT!, HI NEIGHBOR!, THIS SPACE RESERVED). Masochistically, he puts it on. There is a comical chef's hat that goes with it. He dons that, too, pulling it down till the band digs painfully into his domical forehead.

He procures a can of charcoal lighter from the garage, unscrews the cap and performs the libation; then he steps back and tosses a lighted match onto the drenched briquettes. The sacred flame leaps up, engulfs them briefly, then diminishes. Presently they begin to redden, like Poe's embers.

In Jack's backyard, Jack's seven sons are playing baseball. Jack himself, in his capacity as weekend cop, has left to moonlight in the police patrol car. Dad comes out onto the patio in shirtsleeves, carrying a can of Schlitz. He sits down on the glider and rests the can on his lap. In the kitchen, Mom and Nora ready the fryers for parboiling. The sun has reached zenith, and its harsh golden light covers every square inch of the backyard except the area usurped by the splotchy shadow of the Schwedler. The sky is cloudless and should be blue. It is not: it has taken on a dull metallic glare.

— In the county courthouse, my birthdate is officially recorded as July 10th, 1932. I, who will not be born for two thousand years! The inadequacies of the Quadripartite extend into innumerable areas, but their prowess in physical and metaphysical prolepsis is unparalleled.

However, the falsification of my birthdate constitutes only the opening sentence in the spurious pamphlet re my pseudo-past so efficiently circulated by their agents. Fabrications pertaining to my fictive 1932-58 existence can be found galore in the schools I presumably attended and in the minds of the teachers and professors who presumably taught me. "Classmates" carry implanted recollections of me in their cortices; "old girl friends" false phallic memories of me in their wombs. "Hometown neighbors" remember an only son of a childless couple who went up in 100-octane flames. Each Christmas, I receive cards and/or presents from perfect strangers who claim to be my aunts and uncles and whom I pretend to accept as such. Filed away in some military archive is the service record of one Victor Lowery re A "Police Action" he never participated in. Buried somewhere

among my papers is a startlingly realistic Honorable Discharge.

When the Sarn scientists developed time travel during the later years of the Regime, they did not dream of the use to which it would ultimately be put. Nor did the Sarn psychosurgeons, when they devised the Parnassian Link, dream that it might someday be altered into a Parnassian Block.

Such lack of foresight is tantamount to treason. For what more effective means could a dictatorship have of getting rid of a Solzhenitsynian genius than by imprisoning him in the past? And what more effective means could a dictatorship have of punishing an impugner of the state than by snuffing out the very flame that made the impugning possible?

Sometimes in my agony I cry out not only against the forces of evil that robbed me of my birthright but against the forces of good that made the robbery practicable —

Poe's embers are in full bloom. Dad makes a round trip to the kitchen for a second can of Schlitz. Nora brings out the parboiled fryers, and Lowery places them on the grill with a long two-pronged fork. Mom sets the patio picnic table. The afternoon haze augments the sky's dull metallic glare. Jack's oldest son hits a home run.

The Schlitz fits naturally into Dad's square bricklayer's hand. Mom brings Lowery a bowl of Catalina Dressing with which to baste the fryers. She is wearing one of Nora's calico aprons over her blue suit, and a warm motherly smile. Next door, Jack's wife dumps half a bag of briquettes into Jack's outdoor fireplace and drenches them with the same brand of charcoal lighter Lowery used. "After dinner," Mom announces, "we'll all go for a Nice Ride."

Dad sips his Schlitz. Chicken fat and Catalina dressing sputter on poor Poe's embers; little gouts of smoke arise. Mom takes the fork from Lowery's hand. "Why don't you go up on the patio and keep Dad company?"

Trapped, Lowery divests himself of hat and apron; on the glider, Dad and Schlitz make room for one more. In the kitchen, Nora puts water on to boil for corn on the cob. Dad reverts for a while to his prostatectomy, then reminisces about his bricklaying days. He steals an occasional glance at Lowery's pale effeminate hands. Inevitably, son Tom returns to the center of the stage. "Last week his take-home pay was $666.75."

Lowery does not comment.

"His withholding alone is more than most guys make."

"It's more than *I* make," Lowery says.

"Maybe so. But you teachers ain't exactly underpaid these days. And that library job you hold down summers don't hurt none neither."

The Schwedler is directly in Lowery's line of vision. He stares at the arabesques of sky formed by the dark red fascicles. Their brassy glare hurts his eyes, and at length he lowers his gaze. The arabesques remain for a while upon his retinas, then gradually fade away.

It is time to eat. Dad procures another Schlitz to go with his meal. Nora, Mom, Lowery and Dad sit down at the picnic table, Lowery at one end, Dad at the other. Dad heaps his plate with potato salad, crowding his fryer half onto the tablecloth. He keeps an extra ear of corn on hand throughout the meal. Lowery picks at his food. The roar of a power mower comes faintly from the next block as a late riser attacks his lawn. There is a barely perceptible tremor as Sunday shifts into second gear.

— There are times when I wish I could accept as facts the falsehoods so effectively circulated by my jailers, when I wish I could identify wholly with the simians on the shores of whose dark chrono-continent I have been cast up. But I cannot. It is one thing to ape an ape; quite another to be one. Thus I must walk alone, remembering as I go the green lands of Argo, the yellow seas of Tant, the cogent cities of the artificial archipelago the Guitridges built before the Sarn Regime collapsed: stoically bearing the contumelies heaped upon me when in deathless prose-poetry I dared expose the rotten timbers of the monstrous structure that rose from the ruins of the Regime. A giant striding among pygmies, extolling to their offspring the literary merits of other pygmies not fit to shine his shoes —

The Imperial, Dad at the wheel, backroads its way along the littoral. Through verdant arches made by sugar maples, past vineyards and houses and barns, Lowery sits beside Dad in the front seat; Mom and Nora share the back. Lowery suggested taking his Bonneville, but Dad would not hear of it. The Imperial has Air; the Bonneville does not. Dad believes in Air. Windows tightly closed, the Imperial breezes by rows of grapevines that seem to turn like the giant green spokes of a massive horizontal wheel. The grapes are — will be when autumn comes — Concords. This is Concord Country.

Dad does not drive far. The Imperial has a tapeworm, genus PCV, and the gasoline gauge drops visibly with each passing mile. Gasoline is dear these days. On second thought, Lowery is glad they

didn't take the Bonneville. The Bonneville has a tapeworm too.

Well, at least Sunday has not been wasted. It has been established that, come fall (barring an early freeze), there will be grapes galore. Mission accomplished, Dad pulls into a Tastee Freeze Stand for the day's *piece de resistance*. Mom has a Sundae, Dad a double-dip, Nora a split, and Lowery a cigarette. Scene 7.

Dad says, "Vic, I wish you wouldn't smoke in the car."

"Why not?" Lowery asks. "It can't catch fire. It's made out of bricks, isn't it? Like your brain."

There is a terrible silence. Dad starts up the motor. "You're lucky you're Nora's husband, or I'd —"

"*You're* lucky I'm Nora's husband — not I. Who else but a poor dumb school teacher would have taken her off your hands?"

"Vic!" Mom says.

Nora begins to cry.

Dad pulls back onto the highway, driving with one hand. Lowery stubs out his cigarette in the virgin ashtray. "I'll bet when you went to school you carried bricks in your bookbag instead of books."

The Ride is completed in utter silence. The coldness in the car has little to do with Air. Even Mom does not say good-by to Lowery when Dad lets him and Nora out in front of the house. Lowery perks a pot of coffee in the kitchen, takes a cupful out onto the patio. Scene 8. The sky still retains its dull metallic glare. There is no hint as yet of night. Presently Nora joins him, but she does not speak. She will not speak to him for days. Last time he torpedoed Dad, she did not speak to him for a whole week.

At last the metallic glare begins to soften. For a while, the big bonfire of the sun burns redly beyond the Schwedler. There is a faint trembling of the fascicles as Sunday shifts into third and final gear.

Nora and Lowery go inside. She turns on TV and they watch the Lawrence Welk Show. Scene 9. The ABC movie comes on an hour early. They have already seen it twice, but neither makes a move to change the channel. Once again, Alec Guinness suffers nobly for the cause of caste. Once again, aging Bill Holden leads Jack Hawkins' commandos through the bush. Once again, the Bridge is blown to Kingdom Come.

"Dullness! Dullness." the medical officer cries, striding down the slope ...

The news comes on. They watch it, then go to bed. Lowery lies immobile in the darkness till Nora's rhythmic breathing assures him she is asleep. ...Then, soundlessly, he pulls the chrono-cell's only chair

over to the wall beneath the cell window and climbs up on the seat. By standing on tiptoe and stretching himself to maximum height, he can grip the window sill with his fingertips. He pulls himself upward with practiced ease, props one elbow on the sill, then the other. Slowly, he inches himself up and through the stasis field, emerging at the base of a wooded hill. The he pulls his real body through after him. The field's inbuilt dimension-correlator keeps it from emerging inside out.

After it settles into place around him, he starts up the hill. It is night, but the darkness is alleviated by starlight, and he makes his way without difficulty along the familiar trail that leads upward through the conifers to the chalet. Once inside the chalet, he puts through a call to a psychosurgeon he used to know and who is still loyal to the Sarn Regime, which has gone underground. Can the psychosurgeon come at once and remove Lowery's Parnassian Block? The psychosurgeon not only can, he will be glad to be of service to a loyal compatriot like Lowery. He will arrive in a matter of minutes.

Lowery paces the floor, smoking cigarettes. He keeps the lights down low and the blinds drawn because there are Quadripartite agents in the area. At last the psychosurgeon's aircraft drops down into the clearing in front of the chalet. Lowery runs outside to meet him, and the two old friends walk arm in arm back to the chalet. The psychosurgeon is well up in years, but is unsurpassed in his profession. He directs Lowery to lie down on the divan. Lowery complies. The psychosurgeon opens his little black bag and withdraws a rectangular chrome-plated box. After plugging it into a nearby baseboard outlet, he holds it exactly eleven inches above Lowery's forehead and clicks it on. Three pencil-thin blue rays leap from the box's bottom and converge in the middle of Lowery's forehead. "This won't take long," the psychosurgeon says reassuringly, bending over his patient to make sure the rays have converged in just the right spot. "We'll have it burned out of there in a jiffy."

The psychosurgeon's breath smells strongly of Franco American spaghetti. It is a dead giveaway: only Quadripartite loyalists eat Franco American spaghetti. Lowery shoves the box aside and leaps to his feet. "I know what you're up to!" he cries. "The Quadripartite *want* the Block removed! They sent you!"

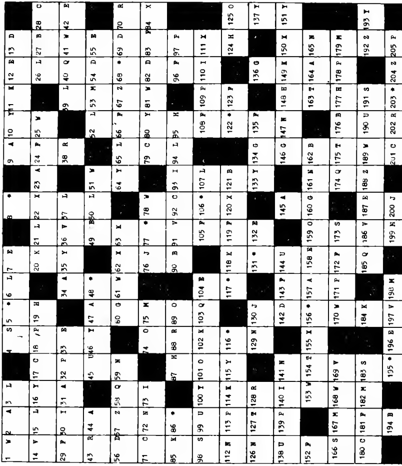
"In point of fact, they do and did," the psychosurgeon says calmly. A fly emerges from his left nostril, crawls diagonally across his hairless upper lip and halts at the

corner of his mouth. "They feel that in depriving you of your flame they went too far, and now they wish to rectify their mistake. If you'll kindly resume your former position on the divan, I'll —"

"No!" Lowery shouts. "I don't trust you! I'm going back to the past!"

Instantly, the room swarms with Quadripartite agents.

Somehow, Lowery eludes their clawing fingers and gets through the door. He runs down the hill, expertly evading the grasping hands that reach out at him from behind every tree he passes. At the base of the hill, he homes in on the chrono-window and crawls back through the stasis field and into his cell. He pulls his body through after him, shaking it free from a Quadripartite agent who has gripped it by the heels. It flows smoothly around him in the darkness, sinks pleasantly into the inner-spring mattress. Frantically he feels for the Parnassian Block. It is still intact, still in place. He sighs. Lowery sleeps.



Acrostic Puzzle by Georgia F. Adams

This puzzle contains a quotation from a work in science fiction. First, guess as many of the clues as you can and write the word or words in the numbered blanks opposite the clues. Put those letters in the matching blocks in the puzzle. If your words are correct, you will see words forming in the puzzle blocks. Fill in the missing letters and put them in the numbered spaces opposite the clues. That will help you guess those words and therefore get more of the puzzle, and so on. You don't need to be familiar with the quotation in order to work the puzzle. The first letters of the correctly answered clues will spell out the name of the author and the title of the work from which the quotation is taken.

A.	**Whet Asimov would have needed to save the 1000 Yr. Plen if the psychologists had failed. (With O)**	9	23	164	2	44	145	157	31	34	47		
B.	**He takes his helf down the middle**	27	176	194	90	121	49	162					
C.	**Author of *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream***	17	79	180	28	201	71	92					
D.	**G. I. Label**	13	69	82	56	142	54						
E.	**Filling with delight**	132	7	42	104	187	12	158	196	55	33		
F.	**Un-American fellow traveler**	66	83	108	135	181	172	123					
		24	29	119	105	143	96	152					
G.	**He's written 150 books, many of them SciFi (first name)**	160	60	134	136	146							
H.	**A crater in the second quedrant of the face of the moon. With *Ebing,* a German neurologist**	177	96	87	19	124	148						
I.	**Jules Verne hero (first initiel end lest name)**	30	140	73	93	110							
J.	**Blast________**	76	130	200									
K.	**A Sci Fi prize**	102	11	85	114	184	149	20	118	63			
L.	**Author of *Nerves***	50	6	52	26	65	39	3	107	21	37	94	15
M.	**Called on a deity**	53	75	167	199	182	198	179					
N.	**A request to slow down (Three words)**	161	126	165	112	129	141	147	72	59			

O.	See A ______	101	159	74	125	89							
P.	Author of *Time Enough for Love*	171	205	109	32	18	178	139	97				
Q.	Proportionate	103	185	40	58	174							
R.	*Virgin* ______ by Poul Anderson	202	70	38	88	43	128						
S.	Planets do this	191	166	173	98	4	183						
T.	An exultant spacemen can be said to be __ ____ of the world	175	127	154	163	113							
U.	Mixture	45	138	190	99	144							
V.	Author of *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad Galaxy*	197	91	186	14	36	169						
W.	The twain that shall never meet (Three words)	78	1	41	25	61	81	51	170	168	153	189	
X.	The ______ *Chronicles*	22	84	155	120	62	150	111					
Y.	Group of predetors	64	80	137	115	100	193	133	10	151	35	46	16
Z.	An ethereal fluid supposed to flow in the veins of the gods	67	204	57	192	188							
*.	Novel by H. G. Wells (three words)	48	106	116	117	122	131	156	195	203	68	5	
		8	77	86									

Solution will appear in the January issue.

Fantasy and Science Fiction

MARKET PLACE

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